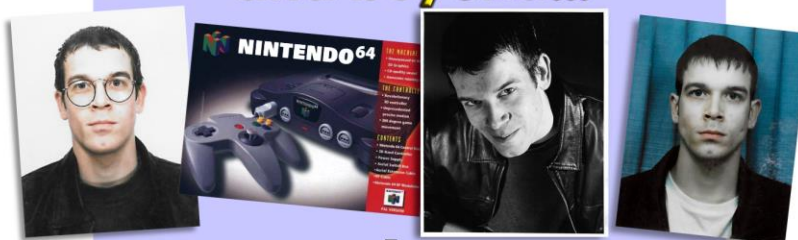




Growing up in 70s and 80s England and witnessing firsthand the home computer phenomenon then going on to work at



and beyond...



by

MARK R JONES

by Mark R. Jones ©2022
v.3

For Dad

Richard Valentine Jones
21 November 1945 – 30 October 2018 - R.I.P.

This book is dedicated to:

To my Mum and Dad for giving me the perfect childhood.

My two sisters Leanne and Nicola.

Phil Cogley-Jones for putting up with all the hours I spent typing all this out.
Auntie Sue, Uncle John, Hayden Andrews and Paul Harwood for being part of
one of the best times of my childhood.

Adrian Singh for being my ZX Spectrum buddy and, while writing this book, our
re-acquaintance after twenty-eight years.

All my old school mates who made that period of my life, for the majority, a happy one.

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Neil Anderson, Paul McKay and Paul Aspinall.

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for agreeing to be interviewed for this memoir.

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Rodney Leiba 1973 – 30 June 1991 - R.I.P.

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Roger Kean and Andy Remic (R.I.P.) for help and encouragement.

Roger and Oliver Frey for starting ‘*Crash*’ magazine and being my friends.

Bob Wakelin 16 December 1952 – 20 January 2018 - R.I.P.

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helped to make that period one of the most memorable.

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Everyone on my Facebook and Twitter who encouraged
me to get all this out of my head and onto the page.

And to all the retro fans out there, including you, without whom this memoir wouldn't exist.

Thank you.

If you have any comments to make about this book then feel free to contact me via my Twitter account at:

<https://twitter.com/MarkRJones1970>

or email:

markrjones197065@googlemail.com

It would be great to hear from you.

If you've enjoyed reading this book and feel like sending me a few quid for
my efforts, time and sanity then you can do so by visiting my Ko-fi page at:

<https://ko-fi.com/markrjones1970>

If you'd like to read about the story of this book being written then search
for **#MarkJonesBook** on Twitter and you'll be able to do just that.

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Chapter 1: 1970 to 1974

“A weird creature made from tree roots.”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'Beyond the Valley of the Dolls' – Russ Meyer, 17 June 1970.
- 'THX 1138' – George Lucas, 11 March 1971.
- 'Duel' – Steven Spielberg, 13 November 1971.
- 'Clockwork Orange' – Stanley Kubrick, 13 January 1972.
- 'Westworld' – Michael Crichton, 21 November 1973.
- 'The Wicker Man' – Robin Hardy, 6 December 1973.
- 'Holiday on the Buses' – Bryan Izzard, 26 December 1973.
- 'The Exorcist' – William Friedkin, 26 December 1973.
- 'Dark Star' – John Carpenter, 30 March 1974.

Somewhere, hiding in a dusty cupboard of the mind, everyone has an earliest memory. My own concerns a programme I was watching on the television. In it was this really grotesque man-thing. He wasn't nice and had a huge bald head. He was being very mean and doing his utmost to hassle a man and a woman. Then something happened and the bad man's deformed head slowly caved in on itself resulting in his death. I was aghast. It was so horrific; I'd never seen anything so gross before. "Is this what bigger children and grown-ups like to watch?" I thought. Luckily, I was in the safety of my Nana and Granddad Tennet's house in the Headlands area of Northampton and my Mum was just in the kitchen. Years later I discovered exactly what I'd been watching and when. Turns out I'd been tuned to 'Doctor Who' on BBC1. The bad man was an alien called a Sontaran and the story was called 'The Sontaran Experiment' and I'm certain this all occurred on a Saturday. This episode, the second of a two-parter, was first broadcast on 1 March, 1975. A later re-broadcast of both parts occurred on 9 July, 1976 which would place my memory taking place during the original broadcast, a Saturday. The show was watched by 10.5 million people that day. I was 4 and $\frac{3}{4}$ years old at the time. What I had seen so terrified me that it has stayed in my head ever since and – if there were any previous childhood memories – that experience has wiped them all out.

I was born on the 12 June, 1970 and named Mark Richard Jones at the Barrett Maternity Home in Northampton; a town set right bang in the middle of England. My parents, Jean (maiden name Tennet) and Richard Jones had married two years earlier on the 19 October, 1968 and later they gave me two sisters, Leanne, born two years after me in 1972 and Nicola who arrived three years later. I was lucky enough to enjoy a happy childhood, full of good memories – excepting Sontaran ones – in which I remember nothing dramatically unpleasant apart from a spot of bullying when I was about 11 years old. My memories of that time are full of lots of free time and the majority of the summer months were spent playing out in our moderately sized back garden, splashing about paddling in pools, having water fights and playing out in the street where we lived. There we rode our scooters and bicycles, knocking on our friends' doors asking, "Are you coming out to play?", exploring derelict houses and, once or twice, being very naughty by indulging in some cherry door knocking. In case you don't know, cherry door knocking involves knocking on someone's front door or ringing their doorbell then running away quickly before the occupant has had a chance to answer it. The 'fun' would come from knowing that the recipient opened the door to see no one there. We were easily amused in the seventies.

A ten-minute walk from the house we lived in on Allen Road was Abington Park which is one of Northampton's main recreational spaces. There, we spent many happy hours with the family dogs and on the swings and slide in the play area. In the park was (and still is) an old mansion turned museum to visit and a row of aviaries filled with a variety of birds to gawp at. We fed ducks at the two lakes, got filthy climbing trees in the two spinneys and ran up and down Tank Hill – so called because its shape resembled a World War II tank. Sadly, the rumours that beneath the hill a real tank lay buried turned out to be a fallacy. It was really great having the park so close to our house because once we were old enough to learn the Green Cross Code – taught to us by a pre-Darth Vader David Prowse in his television information films – and knew how to cross the main road safely we were allowed to walk down to it unaccompanied. There was never a concern back then that we children shouldn't be allowed out on our own. As long as we were back in time for tea, all was well.

On 1 July, 1972 I was presented with a sister. She was named Leanne Kate. I had hoped for a brother though and made sure I told her so on many occasions. The Jones family also had two dogs during the seventies. Paddy, a black and white mongrel, was already in residence when I was born and was a

gentle soul. Unfortunately, a car knocked him down sometime in 1971 and he spent the rest of his days with one of his front legs in a sling. He dealt very well with only having three usable legs and still managed to run and jump around like any other dog. Paddy ran away on a couple of occasions and usually made his own way across Abington Park up to my Nana and Granddad's House in Cambria Crescent, a route he learned from doing our regular family Sunday walk up to see them. As we didn't have a home phone back then Dad would just presume that's where Paddy was and he'd have to walk up there on his own and, nine times out of ten, there he was. In 1976 we welcomed a second dog into our lives. This new one was a little Jack Russell called Rinsky, named after a popular television advert for Cresta soft drinks in which a bear screamed "R-R-R-Rimsky Korsakov". We misheard the advert so Rinsky's name had an 'n' in it and not an 'm'. Rinsky was a lovely dog with a sweet temperament and got on well with Paddy. One day in 1978 Paddy ran off again. He never came back. We didn't ever did find out what happened, but I guess a car probably hit him for the second and last time on the way up to Nana's. Poor Paddy. So, we had a three-legged dog who, eventually, ran away forever.

When the weather and dark nights prevented outdoor pursuits, it was down to our toys, board games, annuals and comics to keep us quiet while at home as well as Dad's large collection of seven-inch singles, which he'd bought in bulk at an auction a few years before. Leanne and I would sit in the back room once children's teatime television had finished and try and find songs we liked within the wooden box of scratched vinyl. Records that were regularly spun by us included *'Barker Of The U.F.O'* and *'Sir Geoffrey Saved the World'* by the Bee Gees from 1967, *'Mouldy Old Dough'* by Lieutenant Pigeon (which had been the second biggest selling UK single of 1972 in the UK), Screaming Lord Sutch singles from the mid-1960s like *'Jack The Ripper'*, *'My Monster in Black Tights'* and *'Til The Following Night'*, *'Donald Where's Your Troosers'* by Andy Stewart from 1960, *'Little White Bull'* by Tommy Steele from 1959 and *'Goodness Gracious Me'* by Peter Sellers and Sophia Loren which was a top five hit in 1960. We would turn the volume up gradually with each song until we were shouted at to "Turn that racket down or I'll come in and turn it off!" by either Mum or Dad who were sat in the front room trying to watch the television.

Entertainment was also provided by the family television set which, at this time, was a black and white one. *'The Adventures of Rupert the Bear'* was by far my favourite show from this period. Made by the ATV network the show lasted for four series totalling 156 eleven-minute episodes between 1970 and 1977. The television programme used string puppets to make the inhabitants of Nutwood move and was narrated by Judy Bennett. Looking back, some of the characters were pretty creepy looking for a children's programme. One of the main characters, Raggerty, who was a weird creature made from tree roots, made me physically scared when he was on screen but still I watched. Another plus was the catchy theme song sung by Jackie Lee that was also released as a single in 1970. I loved it. I became a huge fan and received the 1975 annual for Christmas 1974 and also had a plastic Rupert doll that squeaked when squeezed. I took him everywhere with me.

We looked forward to every birthday and Christmas as the main events that replenished our stock of toys and books. We badgered our parents with requests for the latest toy or game we had seen advertised on television or sitting on the shelf of Taylor & McKenna, the Grosvenor Shopping Centre's main toy shop. Toys needed to be chosen wisely so they would be interesting enough to last and that we didn't get bored of them too quickly. We anticipated each Christmas of the late seventies with repeat plays of a vinyl LP on the Disneyland Records label called *'Favorite Songs of Christmas'* (1972). The tunes we liked best had silly speeded up 'mouse chorus' vocals, not the tracks by seasoned crooners like Cliff Edwards and Louis Prima – popular between the 1920s, 1940s – who sang with their proper voices. Since my birthday fell in the month of June I enjoyed a new influx of toys and books every six months – I couldn't have asked for a better spacing apart of the two most important new toy times. By far, the toy I remember having the most fun with from this era was my *'Evel Knievel Stunt Cycle'*, first issued in 1973 by Ideal Toys. This consisted of a toy bike complete with moving wheels on which you would seat the toy Evel Knievel action figure. Included in the box was a red base with a handle on it and you would place the bike on to the base, wind up the charge using one hand while holding the base firmly on the floor with the other. Once enough charge had been built up the bike would suddenly release itself and zoom off into the distance. It went so fast and far that the only place I could really play with this was on the upstairs landing. Evel would always end up falling off when either the bike's speed was so slow that it would lose momentum and fall over or, as was more usual, he smashed into the wall at high speed. Hours of fun was had just from repeating this procedure over and over again.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1970 TO 1974:

Jimi Hendrix – 18 September 1970.

Janis Joplin – 4 October 1970.

Jim Morrison – 3 July 1971.

Gram Parsons – 19 September 1973.

Nick Drake – 25 November 1974.

Chapter 2: 1975 to 1978

“They weren't real Native Americans at all.”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'Jaws' – Steven Spielberg, 20 June 1975.
- 'The Omen' – Richard Donner, 6 June 1976.
- 'Eraserhead' – David Lynch, 19 March 1977.
- 'Star Wars' – George Lucas, 25 May 1977.
- 'Watership Down' – Martin Rosen and John Hubley, 19 October 1978.
- 'The Lord of the Rings' – Ralph Bakshi, 15 November 1978.
- 'The Water Babies' – Lionel Jeffries, 1978.
- 'Superman' – Richard Donner, 14 December 1978.

BARRY ROAD PRIMARY SCHOOL

Headmaster – Mr Bell.

- Year 1 – Mrs Bonnet (September 1975 – July 1976).
- Year 2 – Mrs Cleaver (September 1976 – July 1977).
- Year 3 – Mr McCafferty (September 1977 – July 1978).
- Year 4 – Mrs Rance (September 1978 – July 1979).

Mum and Dad had their third baby on 29 June 1975. She was named Nicola Dawn. I now had two sisters and was forever destined to sleep in the tiniest bedroom in the house. The two girls obviously shared the middle-sized bedroom. Come September 1975, at age five, I started at my first school. Most of my memories of going to school here are good ones; tainted by some horrendous school dinners and some older girls who were bullies and, on occasion, were sent to look after the class while our form teacher wasn't there. More about those ogres later. I had a large group of friends at Barry Road and one of my first best friends was a boy called Charles Simpson who lived in Chipsey Avenue with his Mum, older sister and baby brother. While at Barry Road his Dad had died and they then moved away to a village not far from Northampton called Lutterworth and I was never to see him again after that. Nowadays I can't even remember what he looked like. Darren Masters, Thomas Mutton, Craig Cousins, Peter Williamson and Steven Hanwell were my other best friends and those friendships lasted a bit longer than the one I had with Charles. Another school friend who disappeared not long after our acquaintance was made and also whose physical appearance is no longer recallable was Geraint Hughes. My only real memory of him occurred in the boy's toilets at the back of the hall we had school assembly in. Geraint was having a wee while stood at least three feet back from the urinal trough. Jayesh Bhat, seemingly unaware that Geraint was mid-piss, walked in front of him and passed straight through his yellow fountain. We all laughed as Jayesh's grey school trousers turned darker just above his knees.

My earliest memory of being at Barry Road concerns a conversation I had with fellow classmate named Julio De Chiara whose family originated from Italy. He had a hard time convincing me that he wasn't a girl because he had curly hair. At this point in time, I was convinced that only girls had curly hair and as Julio had a mop of curls then he must have been a girl and not a boy like he was claiming to be. Julio was adamant he definitely was not a female of the species and there was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between us both as Julio tried to convince me I was wrong and that boys were actually allowed to have curly hair too. I also remember another incident that occurred while I was seated next to a fellow pupil who I won't name to save her embarrassment. During one lesson she got up and reached across the table to get a felt-tip pen from another pupil who sat opposite us both. As she did this I looked to my right and saw that her knickers were in full view. I promptly took the opportunity to pull them down. The girl in question went and told on me to Mrs Bonnet, the form teacher, who promptly made me stand in the corner with my face to the wall as a punishment.

Sometimes Mrs Bonnet had to go and leave her class for a prolonged period of time. I had no idea for what reason or where she went but while she was away an old lady called Mrs Barnard would stand in for her. She lived just across the road from the school gates in Covington Street and would sit there in the classroom and tell us stories for an hour or so. The thing I remember most about her was that Mrs Barnard had quite a pronounced and wispy moustache. So, I'd now met a boy with curly hair who I thought was a girl and a lady with facial hair. Important firsts for a five-year-old.

Barry Road has an old swimming pool attached to it that had first opened in 1903 and it was here that, aged eight, I learned how to swim from the appropriately named swimming teacher Mrs Seals. I earned my

first swimming certificates here, starting at fifteen metres, and we would be awarded these during school assemblies. The certificates were highly ornate and came in different colours, depending on which distance we'd managed to swim. Most of the certificate itself was taken up with a very old-style drawing looking like it had been made in the 1930s. They were signed by someone official in the swimming world and then stamped with an official looking embossed red sticker. I managed to lose all my certificates when I tidied up my room sometime before 1986 and, I think, threw them out with some unwanted comics by mistake.

Just off from the main hall was the television room where we had, as every school appeared to have in the seventies and eighties, a television on wheels in a big black box complete with a set of double doors that the teacher would close when it wasn't being used. We all had to sit down on the floor in the dark and watch the countdown clock that would signify how long we had before the schools programme started. I always wondered why they had to do that with schools programmes. I still don't know really. Was it so that the teacher could settle the class before it started? The television programmes I watched at home didn't have music and a timer before them with just a static picture on display for a few minutes before each one. '*Stop, Look, Listen*' was one of the programmes we watched a lot. The introduction to the programme had a funky seventies theme tune and was narrated by Chris Tarrant. It informed us about things like how to cross the road without getting killed or how ice cream was made. '*Words and Pictures*' was another favourite and would often feature an animated stop motion story which was usually shown in two parts. I particularly remember the one that featured '*The Witches of Halloween*', which myself and my school mates found really quite scary. This episode featured a pumpkin head that was seemingly alive and could talk and was eventually eaten, whilst it was still alive, by the farmer's pig. It chomped and chopped through the pumpkin's head, exclaiming "This is fun" while it did so. It scared me to death.

Sometimes, when Mrs Bonnet would go off again and do her thing (whatever that was) and Mrs Barnard was otherwise occupied, two older girls from the fourth year would come and take charge of the class. I was scared witless of these two as they were, to put it bluntly, sadistic bullies and would eagerly abuse the trust given to them by our oblivious teacher. They would strictly instruct us, as they walked around the classroom for the whole hour, that we had to follow them around with our eyes for every step. If anyone dare to look away while they were sauntering round the room and, God forbid, they saw that someone wasn't looking at them they would single them out and meter out their punishment. I was never able to stare at these idiots for the whole hour that they were in our charge so I would frequently be found to be flouting their ridiculous rules. Even if they saw one of us blinking they would berate the perpetrator for this heinous crime. The resultant punishment was always the same. They made the offender, which was usually me, stand in the corner of the room while they shouted and prodded them in front of the whole classroom until the humiliation was complete. They were so scary and tall compared to us little ones that none of us ever had the guts to tell on them. They got away with being horrible to us for months.

Play time would usually involve a game of '*Army*'. Two teams of boys would be assembled under the Willow tree in the playground and battle would commence. I was always annoyed that I could never, no matter how hard I tried, imitate the sound of a machine gun properly because some of the other boys did it really well. Mine was very weedy sounding and my attempts hurt my throat and made me cough. I'd usually get 'shot' on purpose and go and sit under the tree and sulk as the battle carried on and reached its conclusion.

The only toy we owned that I remember surviving the entire run of me and my two sister's childhoods was a sweet jar full of '*Lego*' bought for us in the mid-seventies. '*Lego*' was regularly emptied out onto the living room floor and kept us occupied for hours. Putting it all away afterwards had to be done really carefully as anyone who's trodden on a piece bare foot will testify. However, my first real obsession was with '*Action Man*' by Palitoy. I acquired my first one – I had at least three in all – for Christmas 1975. As well as the clothes he came with my parents had bought another separate costume and accessories set which was for a Deep-Sea Diver. This additional set came complete with helmet, diving belt, hammer, a dagger that was attachable to his leg, weights for his boots and tubes that attached to his helmet. Hours of fun was had by playing with the Deep-Sea Diver '*Action Man*' during bath time. By blowing into the pipes I could make his suit fill up with air resulting in him bobbing up to the surface. Amazing stuff! How do I remember that I got an '*Action Man*' for Christmas 1975? Well, while we waited for Mum and Dad to come downstairs so we could start to open our presents we children put the radio on. Whenever I hear '*Bohemian Rhapsody*' by Queen I automatically see my '*Action Man*' in my head. '*Bohemian Rhapsody*' was released on 31 October 1975 so it figures that it would have been played on the radio that morning seeing as it was that year's Christmas number one in the singles chart. I loved having an '*Action Man*' and it became my number one toy. The next Christmas or birthday brought more accessories for my '*Action Man*'. I had requested the '*Special Operations Kit*' which consisted of a miniature duffel bag full of all sorts of well-made and detailed objects that any real '*Action Man*' certainly couldn't do without whilst engaging in special missions escaping from the huge Tiger Beast (Dougal the cat), battling meat eating monsters (Rinsky and

Paddy), tackling mountainous terrains (the stairs) or traversing the forest to reach his base (the gooseberry bush just across the lawn in the garden). Included in the kit was a sleeping bag, a revolver, binoculars, hand grenades, sticks of bright orange dynamite, spare boots, a serrated knife, a shovel, a water bottle, an outdoor cooker, pots, a cup, knives and forks and, best of all, a tiny radio set that you could open up and inside was a set of headphones that could be placed on *'Action Man's'* head. Countless hours were spent playing with just this one pack of goodies, though the lid of the radio ended up snapping off not long after I had acquired it, only being held on by two slivers of plastic.

My first major accessory was the *'Action Man Armoured Car'* which was produced between 1968 and 1974. Mum may have found a shop that had some older stock that was on sale at a discounted price or she could have found a second hand one. Made of hard sturdy plastic it was a rugged toy that was able to withstand the amount of abuse it undoubtedly received as I repeatedly pushed it over rocks, lawns, pathways and crashed it down the stairs many times – I can still hear the noise it made as it hit each step. *'Action Man'* was able to sit in the open turret on top of the vehicle and drive to where he was needed aided by the machine gun which pointed forward – he never knew where the enemy was hiding! Attached, was a spare wheel which you could use to replace one of the four working wheels should the tank's owner be little too boisterous and end up breaking one off.

Another favourite toy was the *'Jaws'* game from 1975 and produced by Ideal. I don't know why I was into *'Jaws'* being only 5 years old as I certainly hadn't seen the film at the cinema. The film was released with a certificate rating of PG-13 and my parents have no memory of taking me to see it at that age. Somehow, maybe through all the promotion for it that I was seeing on the television, I may have been aware of it to have asked for and received the game as a Christmas present that year. An alternative reason could be that I received this present for Christmas 1978 after having seen *'Jaws 2'* at the cinema that summer. The film was released with a PG certificate so I could have actually gone to see it without any adult supervision. I do remember that me and Leanne went to see its second sequel, *'Jaws 3D'*, in 1983 and it was the first 3D film we'd ever seen. We sat there in the cinema with our 3D glasses on and specifically remember the 3D effect working when a severed head and shoulders floated in to view during a scene where young girls were walking past a viewing window in a Sea World type establishment. Leanne and I were aghast. The *'Jaws'* game itself was more or less just a re-worked version of the age-old classic *'Buckaroo!'* game also by Ideal. I guess the game designers at the company just amended their original idea to tie it in with the film in order to cash in on its popularity. In *'Buckaroo!'* the object is to add as many of the plastic pieces to the back of the donkey – that had been set to 'buck' as soon as the weight allowed it to – as you could before causing the inevitable 'kick' which caused the pieces to go flying. With the *'Jaws'* game the donkey had been replaced with a shark and you had to remove pieces of sea related junk from its open mouth – a tyre, a skull, a boot, a bone etc. – before it snapped shut. The first person to cause the mouth to close lost the game. Much fun and suspense was had from playing *'Jaws'*, at least for the first few months until the novelty wore off and it was consigned to the cupboard and then the inevitable jumble sale.

Annuals sold by publishers of comics and current television shows used to be popular back in the seventies and eighties and Christmas was always the time to ask for a new one. Receiving an annual was like getting five or six new comics in one go, only they were more colourful and had been printed on better quality paper than their weekly counterparts so were more pleasing to look at and would last longer. Leanne and I were allowed one comic each a week and I usually chose the annual to go with whatever comic I was currently reading. For Christmas 1975 I received *'The Dandy Book 1976'* (DC Thomson). On the cover, Korky the Kat poured sweets into a model train, unaware of mischievous mice who were diverting the track into their mouse hole behind him so they could have the sweets all to themselves.

Watching the television was a huge pastime in the seventies. There were a scant three channels to choose from at the time, BBC1, BBC2 and ITV. We were situated in the Anglia region, fed by a feed from 'the Sandy Heath transmitter' according to the continuity announcers. The video recording of programmes that could be watched back later was still a few years off before it was affordable to the likes of us so if I wanted to watch something I had to know when it was on and be there, plonked in front of the television at the right time, in order to watch it. We were fortunate to have some really inventive and imaginative children's programmes available to us back in the 70s. Most of these were broadcast over the school lunch time, starting at twelve and usually ending around half past, and after each school day until just gone half past five. As I lived not far from my school, I walked home most dinner times so was able to watch the twenty or so minutes of shows that were broadcast at that time. The programmes I favoured the most included *'Rainbow'*, *'Hickory House'*, *'The Flumps'*, *'Cloppa Castle'*, *'Paperplay'*, *'Mr Trimble'*, *'Pipkins'*, *'A Handful Of Songs'*, *'Trumpton'*, *'The Wombles'*, *'Oscar The Rabbit'*, *'Magic Roundabout'*, *'Jamie and the Magic Torch'*, *'Camberwick Green'*, *'Chorlton and The Wheelies'* and *'Bagpuss'*. These shows used puppets of various types to tell their stories and, at the time, I actually thought that these were real living and breathing beings and that the people who made television programmes had some sort of exclusive

access to these strange and wonderful creatures that you never saw out in the street, at the shops or over the park. It just didn't enter my head that Bungle was a man in a suit, that Zippy was made to move by a man under the desk and that stop motion animation enabled the Wheelies to wheel and the Wombles to clean up litter. I was aware that shows like *'Issi Noho'*, *'Mary, Mungo and Midge'*, *'Bod'*, *'Ivor the Engine'* and *'Mr Benn'* used drawings that moved and that these weren't real. I wasn't that naïve. I still didn't understand the process in which they had to go through in order to make them move though. I didn't care nor needed to know at the time. All I knew was that I liked watching them. Usually, two children's shows were broadcast each lunch time and once the theme tune to *'Crown Court'* was heard, which came on immediately after the shows had finished, that was my signal that it was now time to walk back to school for the afternoon's lessons. So, it was coat on and back down the road to Barry Road. I met a 'real' Womble at some event in a park around 1974 and was amazed at how big he was. My illusions had been shattered. This was a man in a suit. I wanted to meet a real one. They looked so much smaller on the television.

I was now becoming more interested in the children's programmes shown after school too. They started at around four o'clock with *'Play School'*. I loved *'Play School'* at first when I was of the right age for it and would always try and guess which window we were going to look through - "Is it going to be the arched window? Or the square window? Or the round window?" but soon grew too old for it. Big Ted, Little Ted, Humpty, Hamble and Jemima, the toys on the show, didn't even move - I now demanded more from my television time! Two other really early shows I have vague memories of watching were called *'Pardon My Genie'*, which had two series broadcast in 1972 and 1973, and *'Robert's Robots'*, which also had two series broadcast in 1973 and 1974. I was still a toddler when these were shown so hadn't really got a clue what was going on in them but liked the weird people that populated them. Once *'Play School'* had finished, it was usually followed by *'Jackanory'*, a show where a well-known television celebrity would sit in front of the camera and read you, the viewer, a story. This was the time I'd usually end up going out in the garden for a bit or read a comic unless the person reading the story was someone I had heard of and liked. *'Jackanory'* ran for just over twenty years between 1965 and 1986 and all sorts of well-known faces took part in the programme including Tom Baker, Peter Sellers, Rik Mayall, John Hurt, Spike Milligan, Brian Cant, Patrick Stewart, Kenneth Williams, Bernard Cribbens, Alan Rickman and Jeremy Irons. BBC 1's *'Blue Peter'* was another favourite. A significant part of British culture, the show first aired in 1958 and is the longest running children's television show of all time. When I started watching John Noakes, Peter Purves and Lesley Judd were the three presenters. My own classic *'Blue Peter'* era and the one I remember the most was the Simon Groom, Peter Duncan, Janet Ellis and Sarah Greene period from the early to mid-eighties. The children's programme that became my favourite, broadcast its first episode on the 8 February 1978 and was called *'Grange Hill'*. Created by Phil Redmond it originally followed the exploits of Peter 'Tucker' Jenkins, Trisha Yates, Benny Green, Alan Humphries, Cathy Hargreaves, the school bully Norman 'Gripper' Stebson and many others. I watched the show through to the end of 1986 when I started full-time work, thus ensuring I was now not at home at the time *'Grange Hill'* was shown which was around ten past five - just after *'John Craven's Newsround'*. Once the main bulk of children's programmes had been broadcast they were then rounded off with a short, usually five minute or so, animated short. This was one of my favourite parts of television viewing ever with shows like *'Ivor the Engine'*, *'The Magic Roundabout'*, *'Roobarb and Custard'*, *'Paddington'*, *'The Wombles'*, *'Fred Bassett'*, *'Ludwig'* and *'Noah and Nelly in Skylark'* being among my favourites. Other early shows from this period that left their indelible marks on me include *'Vision On'*, an art show that morphed (ha!) into *'Take Hart'*, *'Rentaghost'*, a show about spirits for hire first broadcast in 1976, *'Animal Magic'*, all about animals with Johnny Morris, *'Screen Test'*, a quiz show about the latest films hosted by Michael Rodd, *'Record Breakers'*, with Roy Castle and Norris McWhirter, *'Clapperboard'*, with Chris Kelly, which reviewed the latest cinema releases, *'The Ghosts of Motley Hall'*, a show about a haunted mansion, and keeping with the ghost theme, *'Nobody's House'*, a story about a house that was haunted by a boy called Nobody, from 1976.

As I was adding to my book collection I took a liking to the *'Mr. Men'* series in the mid-seventies and watched the animated version on the television which was broadcast early on Sunday mornings along with a semi-religious show called *'The Sunday Gang'* which featured a puppet called Mackintosh Mouse. Written by Roger Hargreaves, *'Mr. Men'* were hugely popular among four to nine-year-old children. The show was narrated by Arthur Lowe, who was best known as his role as Captain Mainwaring in the sitcom *'Dad's Army'*, and it was great fun reading through the book as you watched the television show as the text matched the narration exactly. I amassed a full set of the original first batch of books to be issued between 1971 and 1976 by Thurman Publishing. The collection contained *'Mr. Tickle'*, *'Mr. Greedy'*, *'Mr. Happy'*, *'Mr. Nosey'*, *'Mr. Sneeze'*, *'Mr. Bump'*, *'Mr. Snow'*, *'Mr. Messy'*, *'Mr. Topsy-Turvy'*, *'Mr. Silly'*, *'Mr. Uppity'*, *'Mr. Small'*, *'Mr. Daydream'*, *'Mr. Forgetful'*, *'Mr. Jelly'*, *'Mr. Noisy'*, *'Mr. Lazy'*, *'Mr. Funny'*, *'Mr. Mean'*, *'Mr. Chatterbox'*, *'Mr. Fussy'*, *'Mr. Bounce'*, *'Mr. Muddle'*, *'Mr. Dizzy'*, *'Mr. Impossible'* and *'Mr. Strong'*. Once the second batch was issued in 1978 I had outgrown them and didn't bother adding any more to my library. A

look at the list of the later titles brings back no recollections, evidence enough for me that I didn't get any of them. Back in 1976 one 'Mr. Men' book cost 30p. Nowadays they cost £1.50 each.

For that year's Christmas I opted for something more grown up annual-wise. I loved watching 'Dr Who' – the first television series I actually looked forward to sitting down and watching that was not specifically made for children. I was lucky that I was blessed with Tom Baker as my Doctor as he made a fantastic job of the role. I asked for 'The Dr Who Annual 1977' as my yearly annual request and while I liked some of its illustrations, a few were pretty scary, I didn't really take to reading the stories. Perhaps I wasn't grown up enough for the paragraphs of text the book contained yet. Flicking through it now it looks like, at the age of six, I was a little younger than the target audience it was aimed at.

For 1977 and 1978 I went back to a comic-related publication and received 'Krazy Annual'. Although the comic itself disappeared in mid-April 1978 (it was merged with stable-mate 'Whizzer and Chips'), IPC Magazines continued to publish annuals under its moniker. Since I had been getting the weekly 'Krazy Comic' through 1976 and 1977 I must have missed reading it and so asked for the annuals to make up for the loss. In 1979 I transferred my comic allegiance to Fleetway's 'Jackpot', which started publication on 5 May 1979, and for Christmas that year I got the 'Jackpot Annual 1980'. The cover is somewhat prophetic – it showed a robot alien, his smoking UFO parked in the background, yelling at an arcade fruit machine, "Take me to your leader!" – a sign of things to come maybe? 'Jackpot' was certainly a favourite of mine because I received the annual for it for the next two years after. These annuals were much treasured. I carried them up to my Auntie and Uncle's and Nana and Granddad's over the festive period and there I thumbed through their pages many times. I pored over my current annual endlessly in bed, lying on the floor on my tummy in front of the fire with a bowl of 'Shreddies', and on the bog until I knew every word, every ending to every story until they ended up on the bookshelf next to last year's annual and the years before, all in chronological order or course.

A relative of ours, Molly, had a cottage in Reedham and we would go there for our yearly week away in the school summer holidays. I'm not certain if the first time we went there was in 1977 but my Dad recorded in his diary for that year that we left for a holiday there on Saturday 16 July. Our holiday was delayed as the car Dad had rented decided not to start just as we were due to head off. Once he'd got someone round to look at it, it was discovered that the petrol pump was leaking. Dad sourced the parts (for £12), fitted them and it still didn't work. He then took the carburettor apart and cleaned it out which sorted it out. We left at 9pm that night, nearly nine hours later than planned, and arrived at Reedham during the early hours of the next day at 12:35. During the holiday we paddled in the sea, went to the fun fair, trips to Lowestoft, Gorleston-on-Sea, Norwich (where we visited Anglia House and the cathedral) and Great Yarmouth, watched a 'Punch and Judy' show, went in the 'Haunted House' at the fun fair, took walks along old railway lines and had pub lunches while watching the swing bridge and car ferry in action. On holiday we were also allowed to buy a 'Holiday Special' comic. This was a much bigger edition of a popular comic and I would usually choose the 'Krazy', 'Buster' or 'Whoopee!' issue to read on the beach. Near the end of this holiday Mum and Dad allowed us to buy a toy each. My purchase was a kite which I tried out in an empty field. This was curtailed by the heavens opening and us having to sit it out in the car until it stopped. Leanne chose a climbing monkey and Nicola, a fluffy cat. On our last day Dad found a dead rat in some water. He fished it out then proceeded to stand on it to pop it, much to Mum's disgust! The stench was easily the worst thing I had ever smelt up to this point. Our 1977 holiday lasted for just over a week with us heading back home on the morning of Monday 25 July.

Another memory from one of the holidays at the cottage in Reedham concerns the sleeping arrangements. I always nabbed the top of the bunk bed – I was the oldest, so I always had first choice - and Leanne and Nicola had to argue over the bottom bunk and the single bed. While I was asleep one night on the top bunk I rolled over the wrong way and fell completely out of bed. I broke the handle of the cupboard by the side with my nose just before I hit the floor and didn't even wake up. I arose from my slumber at the usual time, still on the bedroom floor, with a huge cut on my nose wondering why on earth I was there and wondering why my nose hurt. A few years later Auntie Linda and Uncle Gary went on holiday to the same cottage with their kids, my cousins, Joanna and Ian. That trip was remembered for all the wrong reasons when, one night, both children charged into the adult's bedroom as an old treadle sewing machine suddenly started to operate all by itself, along with the treadle moving and various other noises. This should have been impossible as there wasn't anyone there making it work! They were sure a ghostly seamstress had been operating the machine. Joanna was particularly affected by it and had nightmares for months and swore she'd never ever go back to the house, which she didn't!

Back at school we would have assembly twice a week and we marched across the playground into the school hall in strict single file lines. Mrs Rance, one of the teachers, would stand at the back of the hall with a record player that would always be playing 'Morning Mood' by Edvard Grieg as we made our way to our allotted place in the hall. Not once did we ever hear the end of the record as the piece was over twice

the length of the time it took us to find our places. Mr Bell, the headmaster, would conduct the assembly and a few hymns would be sung throughout, 'Morning Has Broken' and 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' were the most common songs we had to sing and assembly would end with us all reciting 'The Lord's Prayer' as we stood with our hands together and heads bowed.

Just after 3pm on Monday 3 October 1977 the fire alarms at the school went off. At that precise moment I was in class painting a picture on an easel, the smell of the poster paints eternally etched into my memory. All my classmates and even the teacher appeared to be, momentarily, a little confused as to whether we should be making a hasty but controlled exit out of the school or not. That was until we saw a dark plume of smoke drift past the classroom window and then the realisation set in that this wasn't a drill and the fire was real. Some of the girls started screaming and crying. As we made our way out it was evident that something awful was occurring as everyone was out in the playground and flames were coming out of the roof of the main hall. There really was a fire and, for a while, it was tremendously scary. Luckily no one was hurt in the blaze but a big part of the middle of the school had been badly damaged. The fire, it turns out, had been the result of an electrical fault. Our school's misfortune made the front-page news of the local paper, 'The Chronicle and Echo', the next day. On the plus side we did get to finish school a little earlier that day, which is always a bonus when you're 7 years old. In the news report one of my friends, Justin Dorman, was interviewed and is quoted in the text. A transcript of some of the report follows below though a couple of sections on the copy made available to me are now unreadable:

"Tuesday, October 4 1977

FLAMES SWEEP THROUGH SCHOOL

But it's lessons as usual today

By Robin Wills

It was school as usual for the 240 pupils at Barry Lower School, Northampton, which was extensively damaged by fire yesterday.

The schoolchildren, aged between six and nine years were just finishing their afternoon lessons when the fire broke out, used makeshift classrooms at the rear of the school and part of the school hall that was undamaged.

Meanwhile work continued today on clearing up the mess and charred debris and assessing the amount of damage caused by the fire which started just after 3pm.

When the alarm was raised all the children managed to leave the school quickly and no-one was hurt. No explanation has been found yet as to how the fire started but eyewitnesses say the fire seemed to spread mainly from the hall. (next section unreadable)

Headmaster, Mr. John Bell said: "The alarm bell was sounded and the children left within one minute. There was no panic but naturally some were crying. We have regular fire drills so everyone knew what to do." said Mr. Bell. "But the fact that it was the real thing has left everyone feeling slightly shattered. After 19 years of work in improving the school it is very disappointing" he said. "The hall has been affected and we have lost a lot of equipment from the stockroom. But it's school as usual tomorrow." said Mr Bell speaking at the scene of the fire. "We shall just have to reorganise ourselves and borrow from other schools."

There are nine teachers including the headmaster at the school which was built in 1900.

It was built by a relative of the famous architect Sir Charles Barry who designed the Houses of Parliament.

Mrs. Jill Grantham the wife of the school caretaker said "We were just getting ready to start work when we heard the alarm bell go. The children all left in a very orderly manner and we helped get the children's coats out. There was smoke billowing out everywhere."

One of the pupils, seven year old Justin Dorman who is in class five, said: "I was just putting away a book I had been looking at when the classroom started smoking. I was a little frightened but I still want to be a fireman."

Repairs to the roof began yesterday to stop it leaking. Men from a firm of building contractors had started work in the morning repairing worn tiles. They managed to get clear when the fire started.”

Paula Leach, who lived just off the road we lived on in Florence Road and was the daughter of two friends of Mum and Dad, called Jeff and Lynne, also attended the school and recalls the events of that day:

“I remember the fire well. It was a boy in our class who actually spotted the smoke from our window in Mrs Hughes' classroom. The workmen were working on the toilet block if I remember rightly. We could see the smoke from where we were sitting. I remember us being evacuated and, for some reason this stuck in my memory, seeing Leanne crying. I remember the dinner ladies going back in to get our coats. Our classroom suffered quite a bit of smoke damage - we had to have our lessons in the hall until it had been redecorated. When we were allowed back in, we all had brand new stuff, i.e: new pens, pencils, crayons etc. as all of our old stuff was ruined. However, I do remember we still read out of some smoke damaged reading books. I can still remember the smell!”

During one school day we had some Native Americans (known as Red Indians back then) come visit us and we had to go over to the other hall to see them. In all, there was about eight of them dressed in war bonnets (feathered head dresses) and they did some appropriately Native American stuff - danced around a pretend fire and had a wigwam erected in the middle of the hall. At the time I thought they were real Native Americans. I was under the impression they'd come over from the USA to see us and, once done, would be off on a plane back to where they'd come from – most probably a clearing in a forest with their open fires and wigwam homes. I was amazed that they'd travelled such a long way just to come and see us children. It was only much later that I realised they weren't real Native Americans at all. They were just some blokes who had dressed up and probably lived not far away at all in the same sort of house that I did. I did feel a little bit cheated and was slightly embarrassed at how long this realization took to occur.

In 1978 I acquired the pièce de résistance of 'Action Man' add-ons, the helicopter - 'with realistic rotor action and working winch'. Produced between 1974 and 1978 the advert for it in the official catalogue stated 'N.B. Does not fly', just in case anyone who was slightly dim got the wrong idea. It was so big that I could actually fit 'Action Man' inside it where there was a pilot's seat and control stick. Once I'd assembled it, the helicopter looked huge but then I was only half the size I am now and nowadays the helicopter doesn't look quite as impressive as it did back then. The helicopter came complete with a button at the back you could press that enabled the rotor blades to go round like a real one. I can't remember what happened to the actual helicopter I owned. I probably ending up swapping it or giving it to a jumble sale, but I must have put it together and took it apart many times because when I acquired an identical boxed helicopter, more than thirty years later, I didn't need to read the instructions in order to assemble it. I instinctively knew how to put it all together despite it coming in many separate pieces. I had remembered how to do it.

By now I had acquired a good few Ladybird books that I stacked neatly on a shelf in my bedroom. Like most boys in the seventies, I had a fascination with dinosaurs and Ladybird had published a fantastic book on the subject in their 'Ladybird Leaders' series from 1974 that I lovingly read over and over. Ladybird also released an educational book called 'Your Body' which told me all about how the human body worked. There's a great picture in the book of a skeleton on page five and I loved skeletons – it was just so weird to me that I had one of them inside me. We had an under stairs cupboard in the kitchen at Allen Road and in it I had hung up a life size glow in the dark cardboard skeleton that I enjoyed going in and staring at in the dark. 'Your Body' also had the word 'anus' in it (titter!) and colour paintings of semi-naked people in various degrees of nudeness. At the very back of the book was a black ink on blue paper drawing of four completely naked people, a woman and a girl and a boy and a man, shown to be having a casual chat with each other whilst seemingly unaware that everyone was dressed in only their birthday suits. This illustration caused much sniggering between my sisters and me as we pointed out the rude bits so openly on display. I was a little surprised that Mum actually let me keep it as our endless laughing about it would have demonstrated that we weren't yet mature enough to deal with such things. We also had, in our small but well-loved library, four Ladybird books in the 'Well-Loved Tales' series. Those were 'The Magic Porridge Pot', 'Jack and the Beanstalk', 'The Enormous Turnip' and 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' and these were regularly thumbed through during wet Sunday afternoons and during those times in bed before sleep where we were allowed to keep the big light on. For a while I had a Yogi Bear night light which was made of an un-meltable plastic type material in the shape of the cartoon character. In it was a light bulb and, once the main light had been turned off, would emit a dim light through Yogi himself and let me at least see that there were no monsters hanging about in my bedroom or under my bed waiting to pounce on me.

In the summer of 1978, I went to see the film of the year at the cinema that me and almost every single boy and most adults of that era clamoured to go and watch. I then totally immersed myself in that world and the toys that resulted from it afterwards. The film was, of course, 'Star Wars'. I went to see the

movie on a really hot and sunny day. I remember, after the film had finished, coming out of the cinema around late afternoon between three or four o'clock and the sun actually blinding me as my eyes adjusted from having been in the darkened confines of the cinema screen for the past two and a half hours. After that cinematic experience, everything then was all about 'Star Wars'. The games we played at break times at school changed. We were no longer in the army pretending to fight with guns. We were now either fighting for the good of the Jedi or the evil dark side and lightsabres, instead of guns, were the imaginary weapons we now emulated. The sound of a space age throb from one of these amazing energy swords being swung through the air had taken the place of the pretend machine gun noises that we'd made previously. Back then we had to try and find a way to relive the film we'd just seen as it wasn't possible to wait a few months and buy a version of it to view at home as you can now. The only way we could do that was to buy the paperback. The book, written by George Lucas and published by Sphere, cost 95p. The cover bore a flash across its bottom right corner exclaiming 'The Greatest Film Of The Century' and, at the top, a yellow star with the words 'With 16 pages of fabulous colour' – there, in the middle, was a scant selection of stills from the film and that was the only way we could again see images that we had seen in the cinema, albeit stationary versions of them. I never bothered to read it all the way through. I'd read sections every now and again, but the most thumbed part of the book was the photo section and that was the main reason I'd made the purchase. I then went on to collect a fair number of the action figures that were now popping up in every toy shop up and down the country and made by a company called Kenner. Every boy I knew who was around my age had at least a few of these and would bring their latest additions in to school to play with during break time. Over a hundred unique action figures were produced between 1978 and 1985, during which time over 300 million of them were sold. I managed to get all the main characters and spent many happy hours out in the garden re-enacting scenes from the film. I loved the gold coloured C3-PO best, R2-D2 was another favourite and had a revolving head that made a satisfying click when you turned it around. The Darth Vader figure went one further and had a retractable red lightsabre in his arm that could be pulled out so that he was equipped and ready to commence battle. I treasured my collection. That was until the next holiday we had in Norfolk.

We went back to Reedham in 1978, leaving Northampton on the afternoon of Friday 21 July. This year's holiday consisted of more trips to the beach, looking for crabs, me and Dad going in the '*Haunted House*' at the fun fair again (it must have been good to have warranted a return visit!) while Leanne and Nicola went on some horses (this resulted in Nicola having a screaming fit and had to be taken off), pub lunches, walking around various villages, taking train trips to Lowestoft, Norwich and Sheringham, a trip to Pettits Zoo where we fed birds and monkeys, canoeing and a visit to a penny arcade. Again, toys were bought at the end of the holiday. This time Leanne chose a doll and Nicola an '*Eggman*' (whatever that was!) I chose to buy a '*Wee wee man*' which was a plastic figure set on a pedestal. You'd fill up the base with water then when you pulled the man's shorts down he would do a wee! I found this hilarious.

On one beach trip I took along all my '*Star Wars*' figures in a carrier bag. It wasn't until we'd been walking along the sand for at least twenty minutes and had found a decent enough spot to settle down for the day that I realised my carrier bag had a hole in one of the bottom corners and, one by one, my '*Star Wars*' figures had been dropping out on to the ground. I was horrified. I re-traced my steps to try and find them, but they were nowhere to be seen. Either the wind had kicked up - instantly covering them over with sand as soon as they'd dropped out - or some lucky child was following a trail of free toys and had been picking them up and whisked them away. To say I was gutted is an understatement. My collection was gone forever, and I never ended up replacing them. I think I just had too many to be able to do so and was getting more into '*Action Man*' to be that bothered in the end. Do I get new '*Action Man*' toys or replace my '*Star Wars*' figures? '*Action Man*' won out. We left to go back home on Saturday 29 July.

While at Barry Road I was a member of the school choir and was one of only two boys – the other being my friend Neil Donaldson – who were members. The teacher was a nice lady called Mrs Coles who was aged late fifties at least, had sharp features and her long black hair was tied back in a bun. I had an okay voice and could, and still can, hold a tune without wavering too far off. One of the first songs we learnt was one called '*Okki-Tokki-Unga*' which was about a little Eskimo boy. The words to the song, the author of which no one knows, are as follows:

*“Okki-tokki-unga, Okki-tokki-unga,
Hey, Missa Day, Missa Doh, Missa Day,
Okki-tokki-unga, Okki-tokki-unga,
Hey, Missa Day, Missa Doh, Missa Day
Hexa cola misha wani
Hexa cola misha wani”*

The song was well and truly learnt by myself as forty years later I still remember the tune and almost all of the words though I still haven't got a clue what the song's actually about. I stayed a member of the choir for most of my duration at Barry Road and it culminated in me having to sing a solo verse in the Christmas Carol service of '*Silent Night*' in December of 1978. Neil had the solo before me and I was absolutely petrified during the run up to my turn and the relief once my part was over nearly made me collapse. In a photo from a February 1979 article in the local paper about the school Neil and I can be seen standing next to each other, just as we had done for the carol service, whilst singing a song in the choir.

As I lived so close to Barry Road, I had the good fortune of being able to walk to and from home for dinner most days. During my first year, having a school dinner soon proved so traumatic for me that, should I not be able to go home for lunch, I always asked Mum to make me a packed lunch. The school dinners back then were, to be brutally honest, disgusting. I recall being in the main hall one lunch time and having a plate full of some sort of spaghetti in a foul tasting, brown, watery sauce and a teacher standing over me making me eat it up. It was stone cold, no doubt because it had been there for so long, and I was bawling my eyes out. An attempt was made by me to go and scrape it into the bin was thwarted by said teacher who was of the opinion that I hadn't eaten enough. It was horrible! The only thing I've tasted since then that had a similar flavour to that day's dinner is stomach bile. After that, I tried my best to avoid school dinners at all as I could not bear a repeat of what I had experienced that day. During play times we would dare each other to lift the lid off the school dinner bin which was situated in the playground. It would frequently make the person lifting the lid retch loudly, the stench being so odious, but would make the kids who were watching laugh out loud.

I'd also like to mention that all of the classes at the school back then were made up of predominately white children. We had a couple of black kids and a couple of Asian kids. Neil Donaldson, Anthony McFarlane, Philip Mensa and Michael Jackson (yes, you read that last name right!) were black and Jayesh Bhat and Altab Ali were Asian. I never ever thought of these six boys, who were my friends, as 'the black and Asian kids in the class'. I thought no differently about them as I did my white school friends. To me, they were simply Neil, Anthony, Philip, Michael, Jayesh and Altab.

I participated in a couple of school plays whilst at Barry Road. In one I played a Shepherd in the yearly nativity play and, for the other, had a starring role in a story about a brother and sister whose toys came to life when they were asleep. I played the male lead and ended up really regretting volunteering to take on the part. It turned out that after weeks of rehearsal, Mrs Rance, the teacher who was producing the play, suddenly decided she wanted me and my pretend sister to hold hands and skip round in a circle during one of the musical interludes right up on centre stage. A wave of horror descended upon me when I realised what I was going to have to do. I thought that having to flounce around on the stage in front of everyone was tremendously girly. I didn't want to skip around holding hands, but I had to do it and, as with my choral solo, spent the time leading up to it feeling absolute dread. I just had to grit my teeth and get it over with. I found it hugely embarrassing but no one else appeared to notice other than me. It was all just the result of me being tremendously self-conscious back then. Even now, when I hear '*In Dulci Jubilo*' by Mike Oldfield, the tune that would signal the start of the dreaded 'skipping about like a girl' sequence, I have a minor panic attack. (<https://youtu.be/VCvz7ufIMIU>)

Two freshly published comics a week, one from Mum and one from Nana Jones, satisfied my thirst for something new to read. I started off by asking Mum for '*Krazy Comic*'. Published by IPC Magazines Ltd it commenced weekly publication on the 16 October 1976 until 15 April 1978 after which it merged with stable mate '*Whizzer and Chips*'. The first three issues of '*Krazy Comic*' came with the added bonus of free gifts. Issue one came with some '*Fangtastic Plastic Fangs*', issue two with a '*Super Jet Camera*' and three a '*Top Pop Hummer*' which was a sort of cardboard kazoo. This was a sure-fire way to entice new readers away from already established publications and many new comics employed the same tactic to bolster their fledgling readership. '*Krazy Comic*'s colourful covers set the publication apart from the other comics that were to be found on the newsagent's racks and I really did treasure each new issue. My allegiance to a comic never lasted long though and I soon jumped ship and bought '*Monster Fun*', then '*Buster*' (who then both joined forces and turned into one comic), '*Whoopee!*' was next, then '*Jackpot*' and '*Cheeky Comic*'. Cheeky was an original member of the '*Krazy Gang*' and had been deemed popular enough to star in a comic all of his own. My Nana Jones also bought me and my sister a comic a week each which we would get on our Sunday sojourns to hers where she lived with Granddad Jones. In 1976 my Sunday treat, along with a whole box of McVities Jaffa Cakes all to myself, was called '*Magic Comic*' (Every Monday 8p), 'The super NEW picture paper for young children'. Some of the illustrations in '*Magic Comic*' were pretty psychedelic. '*Spaceship Lollipop*' was my favourite story, it looked very '*Yellow Submarine*' like and was the most colourful and weird looking story in its pages. Advertised in the comic was '*The Magic Club*'. If you sent off a 25p postal order you could join it yourself. This I did and after many days of waiting for the postman to deliver a package addressed to me and not Mum or Dad, I soon received a wallet, membership

card and *'Magic Scribble Pad'*. I loved them all so much. These were so exquisite to me that I slept with them that night. I awoke in the morning to find I had wet the bed and my treasures were all soaked in wee wee. They were ruined. I most definitely cried. Leanne enjoyed *'Twinkle'* comic which was way too girly and babyish for me to read and Nicola was too young to get anything from Nana Jones other than hand knitted bonnets and cardigans.

Saturday mornings in 1977 consisted of reading comics and watching cartoons first then choosing to view either BBC 1's *'Swap Shop'*, presented by Noel Edmonds, Keith Chegwin, Maggie Philbin and John Craven, or ITV's *'Tiswas'*, presented by Chris Tarrant, Sally James, Lenny Henry, Bob Carolgees and John Gorman. I preferred *'Swap Shop'* and would only switch over to *'Tiswas'* if the former was showing a feature I wasn't really interested in. *'Tiswas'* was a bit too noisy for me! One of the segments in *'Swap Shop'* was the *'Swaparama'*, which would involve an outside broadcast headed by Chegger's, where the general public would be invited to come down and bring something they didn't use any more and wanted to swap for something else. In each show Noel would shout "Where are you Keith?" and the nation would wait with bated breath to see if he was just down the road. One day he was!

On 26 February Keith announced that this week's *'Swaparama'* was in the playground in Abington Park, a short walk from my house! This was amazing. On the television we saw Keith atop the rocket shaped climbing frame that me and Leanne had climbed up many times as he announced that day's location. We begged Mum to take us to the park so we could see it happening for ourselves. She agreed, got me and Leanne ready and we both scabbled about trying to find something to swap with someone. After a quick search I chose my Fisher Price *'Jack in the Box'* that I had outgrown many years ago and took that down to the park with me. When we arrived we saw the playground was packed. Hundreds of people had turned up. So many, that you could barely see any of the swings and climbing frames that the playground contained. There was Cheggers too, right in front of us. This was so exciting. He was the first person I'd ever seen in real life who I'd only seen previously on the television. We watched for a while as he broadcast a segment live to thousands of other children around the UK then went up to him and he quickly facilitated a swap for my *'Jack in the Box'* for a record I took a fancy to because it had a cool looking cover called *'Spin a Magic Tune'*. We did the swap and left not long after. As we were at the location and the show was live we never did find out if we were actually ever on the television. I know my swap wasn't broadcast as it wasn't done to the camera but there was a chance we could have been spotted in the background crowd somewhere. It had been a very exciting morning and we talked about it for days after. I thought the record I'd acquired was great and added it to the collection of music we three children listened to on the record player in the back room. The record had been released by Tempo Records in 1973 and had been advertised on the television at the time. It contained songs about a multitude of cartoon characters like *'Rupert the Bear'*, *'Atom Ant'*, *'The Hair Bear Bunch'*, *'Space Kidettes'*, *'Noddy'*, *'Scooby Doo'*, *'Bugs Bunny'* and *'Penelope Pitstop'* all held together by narration pertaining to a loose story about 'John and his clever little doggie 'Samson'; they have a Magic Top Tune which brings in a different story about a nursery cartoon character every time they spin it'. In reality it was Mike McNaught, who wrote all the music, and Ken Martyne, who wrote the lyrics. It sounds much like late 60s/early 70s easy listening type music and, in its favour, some of the songs are very pleasant sounding and catchy. It had obviously been put together by people who knew what they were doing rather than some cheap cash in.

By 1978, as I'd got a bit older and had grown out of *'Magic Comic'*, I asked Nana Jones to get me the slightly more grown up *'The Beano'* featuring Dennis the Menace and his sidekick, Gnasher, on the cover. This comic cost a whopping 7p an issue. I, again, sent off through the advert in its pages, and joined the *'Dennis the Menace Fan Club'* and soon I received in the post the two club badges. One was a hairy *'Gnasher'* badge with moving eyes and the other a 'metal badge in bright colours' with Dennis on it. For this pleasure a 35p postal order was required to receive these prized trinkets. And no, I didn't wee on these ones. I, not long after acquiring them, lost them instead.

Sometime around 1977-78 the family welcomed a new member into the fold, a kitten. Our previous cat, Dougal (named after the dog in *'The Magic Roundabout'* television show), had disappeared a few months before and was never heard from again. We three children would have been very excited to have this new, fluffy and oh so cute addition to our ranks and fussed, cooed and petted it until we were told to "Give him some peace now please!" We called him Whiskers. Little did we know, and I only found this out at least twenty years after the event, that when Leanne and I had been at school the day after the kitten had arrived Mum had been out in the garden hanging the washing out. The kitten was playing around on the grass, carefree and happy in its new home, and ran in to the line prop which fell from the washing line it was propping and landed on its head, smashing its skull in. My Mum looked on in horror as the sweet ball of fun thrashed around on the floor spitting blood and white stuff from its mouth. The kitten was in the throes of death. Mum had to think about what on earth she was going to tell us when arrived back from school. She had about four hours to come up with a plan. So, she did the only decent thing she could do;

went straight out and up to Auntie Sue's from where she had got the original kitten and picked another one that looked similar and brought it back to the house. Me and Leanne arrived back from school and were none the wiser. We hadn't got a clue that the Whiskers we had said "Goodbye" to as we toddled off to school that morning was now dead and buried in the garden with its head bashed in and an imposter was now in his place. We remained oblivious for the duration of Whiskers' life.

During the 1970s Dad had started off working full-time as a postman then moved on to Brooks Manufacturing in Clarke Road, a real old fashioned and large factory full of, mostly, women who sat at sewing machines all day making clothes. The company was soon taken over and renamed Tootal Fashions for most of the duration of Dad's time there. Granddad Tennet also worked there for years as the chief cutter then moved to manning the reception when it was due to close at the end of the decade. He was the very last employee of the company there. Dad would also go window cleaning on a Saturday morning to give him some extra cash (not much though, his diary records earning £3 in 1978 for one morning's work). Mum worked part-time in the evenings as a cleaner for the Water board to bring in some extra cash then moved on to Pinnocchio's Pizza, a new take away on the Wellingborough Road that opened around 1978 and managed to stay trading until 2017. She would serve customers and prepare pizzas. We'd never heard of pizza before, it was completely foreign to us. We'd never ever seen one let alone eaten one. One day Mum bought home two Pinnocchio's Pizza t-shirts for me and Leanne which bore the Walt Disney character. We wore them with pride knowing our Mum worked there. Up until it closed I would always try and buy a pizza from them during my visits to Northampton. They were delicious. After this Mum moved a few doors up to another take away called Mid-West (which is still there) and worked there as a cleaner. Sometimes me and Leanne would walk down (on our own!) near the end of Mum's shift and sit on the counter and wait while she tidied up and walk back home with her when she was done.

Another film I saw at the cinema and then bought the book adaptation was of Charles Kingsley's '*The Water Babies*'. Released in cinemas in 1978 the film starred family favourite Bernard Cribbens as Masterman and James Mason as Mr Grimes. Directed by Lionel Jeffries half the film was live action – the bits of the film that were set above water – and the other half – the underwater sequences – cartoon animation. My Auntie Linda took me to see it and I absolutely loved it at the time, only being 8 years old. Here though is one example where I should have left the film as a pleasant memory and I now regret re-watching it again in my later years. While the live action sections, filmed in York and at Denton Hall in Wharfedale, still stand up to today the animation sequences are exceedingly poor and haven't aged at all well. Still, it had some really catchy songs in it that I was able to remember the tunes of by the time I'd bought the paperback a few days later. The book, published by Armada Originals and retailing at 60p, contained the words to all the songs featured in the film and I was able to sing along to them again in my head while reading it. I can still remember the tune to '*High Cockalorum*', my favourite song from the film, today. (<https://youtu.be/4b30qcViYFw?t=33>)

One evening I'd been up to Gordon's Sweet Shop that was situated just off the top of Allen Road on the corner of Adnitt Road and Lea Road. I'd made my purchase, probably 10 pence worth of sweets, and started to run home. It was raining quite heavily, and I distinctly remember seeing the reflections of the streetlights in the puddles that had formed in the road. As I was approaching my house something occurred that frightened the life out of me. I was only four houses away from our house when a man, who had a look of absolute terror on his face, ran out from number 71 and into the road where he promptly disappeared halfway across it. I only saw him for less than a second but, even now, I can still recall every fold of clothing he was wearing, his greasy long hair that was trailing behind him, his pockmarked face and unshaven chin. I ran into our house and paused in the unlit hallway to compose myself. Things get weirder as my memory of this bit is not of the view as seen by my eyes but as if I was someone else standing in front of me and was looking at my own face. It was here where I realised that the man I had seen had been see-through. What had happened? I was too young to work it out. For years I had made myself believe that I had made this up and was pretending I had seen a ghost. It was only during the writing of this book when I asked my parents about this, that I found out I never, ever told anyone about it. So, I had to question myself. Why convince myself I had made this up when I hadn't told anyone anything about it? What was it with the bit in the hall where I'm looking at myself? Why, forty years later, do I still remember it all with such clarity and attention to detail? I've come to the conclusion that I did see what we would call a ghost but my 7 or 8 year self couldn't deal with it, so I convinced myself I had made it all up. The bit in the hall could be how my brain dealt with it by making it look like it had happened to someone else. Not me. Not Mark Jones who was still at primary school. It had happened to that other little boy I'd stood in front of in the hallway. I didn't make it up at all. I believe it actually happened.

In my final year at Barry Road, we were made to read two books as a class. We would have to read a chapter each week as homework then, during the lesson, we would talk about what had gone on and various boys and girls stood up to read a paragraph out of the chapter in question. The first one was '*Stig of*

the Dump'. The children's book was written by Clive King and illustrated by Edward Ardizzone in 1963. Published by Puffin it was the first fiction book that I really took an interest in and took an active interest in finding out what was going to happen next. Later, in 1981, it was adapted into a children's television series and starred Keith Jayne as Stig and Grant Ashley Warnock as Barney. A few years later I saw the film *'Time Bandits'* and thought the lead character was played by the same boy. It was only much later that I found out it was actually his almost identical brother, Craig Warnock, who was a year older than his brother. It turns out Grant originally went to the audition for *'Time Bandits'* in view of getting the lead part of Kevin and brother Craig accompanied him only so that he had someone to go with. Grant was turned down and Craig got the part without even trying.

The other story we read was another Puffin paperback called *'Worzel Gummidge'* (or *'The Scarecrow of Scatterbrook'*). Written originally in 1936 by Barbara Euphan Todd this particular book was soon to be a subject of a very popular children's television series that aired in 1979 starring ex-Doctor Who Jon Pertwee as Worzel and Una Stubbs as Aunt Sally. The show aired on Sunday afternoons and we would watch it at Nana and Granddad Jones' house during our weekly visits. My Granddad and Dad appeared to enjoy *'Worzel Gummidge'* as much as I did and the programme regularly made my Granddad laugh so hard he couldn't breathe and would end up coughing and spluttering.

In 1978 I joined the 30th Northampton Cub Scouting group that met at the Abington Avenue church rooms on Roe Road. To be a member you had to be aged between 8 and 10 years of age. Here we pledged our allegiance to the leader, Akela, and improved our key skills abilities like teamwork, social skills, leadership and self-confidence. Proficiency badges were earned for learning things like tying specific knots, lighting fires using tinder and wood, making shelters and practising first aid. I wore my cub uniform and red neckerchief with pride – that was until one day, while waiting to be let into the building, some big boys came along and tried to strangle me and two other Cubs with our woggles.

For Christmas 1978 my main presents from Mum and Dad were the *'Krazy Annual 1979'* and the *'Meccano Construction Set 1'* which "makes 35 models" and was aimed at "7-year olds and over". I was 8 so was part of the manufacturers target market. I wasn't happy though as Dad's diary for the day records:

"Nicola and Leanne loved their dolls – Mark not so happy with his Meccano."

I have no idea why I pulled a strop over getting *'Meccano'* for Christmas. Maybe I'd set my sights on receiving something else? An *'Action Man'* related present maybe? Anyway, I obviously went in a mood when it became apparent I wasn't going to get it. Rudely, my *'Meccano'* set went unused as my Mum recalled recently when I showed her a photo of the box it came in:

"All I remember is that I don't think you ever made anything with it!"

Now there's gratitude for you!

THOSE WE LOST IN 1975 TO 1978:

Tim Buckley – 29 June 1975.

Sid James – 26 April 1976.

Elvis Presley – 16 August 1977.

Marc Bolan – 16 September 1977.

Keith Moon – 7 September 1978.

Chapter 3: 1979 to 1981 “Who's he?”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'Alien' – Ridley Scott, 6 September 1979.
- 'Scum' – Alan Clarke, 12 September 1979.
- 'Salem's Lot' – Tobe Hooper, November 1979.
- 'The Empire Strikes Back' – Irvin Kershner, 21 May 1980.
- 'The Elephant Man' – David Lynch, 10 October 1980.
- 'The Shining' – Stanley Kubrick, 7 November 1980.
- 'Superman II' – Richard Lester, 9 April 1981.
- 'Excalibur' – John Boorman, 10 April 1981.
- 'Gregory's Girl' – Bill Forsyth, 23 April 1981.
- 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' – Steven Spielberg, 12 June 1981.
- 'Clash of the Titans' – Desmond Davis, 2 July 1981.
- 'Time Bandits' – Terry Gilliam, 10 July 1981.
- 'An American Werewolf in London' – John Landis, 21 August 1981.
- 'Southern Comfort' – Walter Hill, 25 September 1981.
- 'The Evil Dead' – Sam Raimi, 15 October 1981.

Around Easter of 1979 the family moved to a new house. We didn't go far though. Where we moved to was only on the other side of the main Wellingborough Road across from the street in which we'd already resided in previously. Apparently, we needed a bigger place to live and the houses on Lutterworth Road were of an ideal size to accommodate Mum and Dad's requirements. As I was the only brother to two sisters, yet again, I ended up with the tiniest bedroom and my two sisters shared the bigger room. My protests came to nothing. For a few weeks though, we had two houses as the new one needed decorating, so we'd spend the day down there, stripping away wallpaper and scraping paint, then go back up to Allen Road for tea, bath and bed. While all this was going on we had our little portable radio tuned to Radio One and it was the first time I took any notice of what was current in the Top 40. There are a few songs that, whenever I hear them now, transport me back to a furniture-less Lutterworth Road and the smell of wallpaper paste fills my nostrils seemingly out of nowhere. '*Oliver's Army*' by Elvis Costello (rel. 2nd February 1979) is one. For years I couldn't work out what the hell the song was about as I thought Elvis was singing "Alama Zombie" when really he was singing "Oliver's Army". It only took me about fifteen years to find out what the words really were. Two other songs included '*Cool for Cats*' by Squeeze (rel. 9th March that year) and '*Girl's Talk*' by Dave Edmunds (rel. 25th May). Either we had the radio on more frequently from then on or maybe I was just taking more notice of it due to my age. I still didn't start going to the shops and buying records (there was no way I could afford that) but I was picking up on stuff I liked for the first time.

Other tracks that came later on and will forever remind me of living in that house include '*Video Killed The Radio Star*' by Buggles, released 7 September 1979, '*Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick*' by Ian Drury (rel. 23 November 1978), '*Are "Friends" Electric*' and '*Cars*' by Gary Numan (rel. 19 May and 21 August 1979), '*Turning Japanese*' by The Vapours (rel. 1980), '*Golden Brown*' by The Stranglers (rel. 10 January 1982), '*It's My Party*' by Barbara Gaskin and Dave Stewart (rel. August 1981) (hearing this song I immediately picture myself laying on the floor in the living room looking at my old coin collection and reading comics) and '*Happy Talk*' by Captain Sensible (rel. 26 June 1982). All in all, the songs my nine-year-old self picked out to whistle along to form a pretty cool little playlist, bar one possible exception. You can forgive me for liking the Buggles song though, surely?

On Wednesday 18 April we were in the middle of the Easter holidays from school. It was early on in the day and I was playing out with one of the two boys I used to live next door to in Allen Road, Matthew Clarke, who was a year or two younger than me. While out on our bikes we went and visited his Auntie who lived at the bottom of Beech Avenue, a street opposite where the boating lake is situated in Abington Park. Her husband, Matthew's Uncle, arrived home while we were there. His name was Roger Winter and he just so happened to be the current Mayor of Northampton. Upon his entrance Matthew's Auntie noticed he looked ashen and troubled so asked him what was wrong. He replied, "A boy's been murdered". All three of us gasped. The body had been dumped in an alleyway between Birchfield Road East and Cedar Road East, not far from where we were at the time, and had been discovered just a few hours before by Mrs.

Irmgard King, who was on her way to work that morning at 8:10. This was the first murder I remember being aware of in Northampton and it scared me to death. The front page of that evening's *'Chronicle and Echo'* newspaper (Northampton's local paper) carried the sad news along with a photo of the poor victim. His name was Sean McGann and was pictured in a school photo wearing black rimmed glasses. He had been strangled and was only 15 years old. I thought that he could have been me or any of my school friends. While I was 6 years younger than Sean his photo reminded me of the numerous school photos that had been taken of me and all my other school mates and featured in most of my friend's living rooms, framed and displayed by their proud parents. The article told us that the night before Sean had visited the fairground that was then set up on Mid-Summer meadow, just outside of the town and just across the road from Cliftonville Middle School. He never made it home. The murder shocked everyone who lived in Northampton. This was the first time I fully realised that murders took place. It was just unthinkable to me that one person could do that to another. There had been other murders in and around the town but, being 8 years old, I didn't take much notice of the news, either on the television or in the papers, so was oblivious to it. Having heard about the awful event first-hand from the Mayor of the town I evidently wanted to find out more so ensured that I read the news reports when my Dad arrived back from work with the paper later that day and the days that followed.

Sean's killer was never caught, and it still remains an open case nearly forty years later. I once knew someone in the Police who told me, sometime in the 1990s, that they had a pretty good idea who was responsible for Sean's murder but, due to a lack of any real evidence, they couldn't take him to court for it. The Police had to wait for something more to come to light because if they had gone for a trial on what evidence, if any, they had then they were pretty certain the perpetrator would be found not guilty and they wouldn't be able to try him again should any more evidence come to light. The rule that allowed that to happen is now, thankfully, not enforceable any more due to changes made in the law in 2005 on the back of the Stephen Lawrence case.

CLIFTONVILLE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Headmaster – Mr Murby.

Year 1 – Mrs Lumbis (September, 1979 – July, 1980).

Year 2 – Mr Timbrull (September, 1980 – July, 1981).

Year 3 – Mr Tarry (September, 1981 – July, 1982).

Year 4 – Mr Fleming (September, 1982 – July, 1983).

In July 1979, having just turned 9 years old, I left my primary school and, after the six weeks summer holiday, moved to Cliftonville Middle in September. The new school was situated just a twenty-minute walk towards town from our house. The school laid on a *'School Special'* bus service where pupils could get on for free and be dropped off at school in the morning or near home afterwards. I would walk to school, down the Billing Road, past St. Andrew's Psychiatric Hospital and the spooky Billing Road graveyard and get the free bus back home. Travelling on the *'School Special'* was always a rowdy experience but not in a bad way. There was never any grief and the height of any bad behaviour consisted of pulling faces at passing pedestrians or writing rude words on the steamed-up windows. In the main, I had a good time at Cliftonville. The teachers were good and fair (usually) and I was able to indulge in a whole afternoon of art lessons with Mr Naylor once a week, which was always the highlight of my school week. I also enjoyed music lessons even though I couldn't play an instrument of any kind myself. My main memory of Mrs Sharpe's music class was the old poster she had on the wall in the classroom of a man with a mop of curly hair telling us "The pollution problem is in our hands. Keep Britain Tidy". He looked out on us over four years of lessons and it wasn't until many years that I found out that the man on the poster was pop star Marc Bolan from T-Rex and had been dead for at least two years already having died in a car crash in 1977. The poster itself was quite old even then coming from an ad campaign that ran in 1976. Mrs Sharpe was one of the two strictest teachers I'd ever had teach me, (the other being Mrs Walton). It didn't help that she had always had eyeliner on that went into a point at the side of her eyes that made her look eviller than she really was. One day I felt the full extent of her wrath when I managed to piss her off good and proper during an afternoon music class. We were watching a slide show about the life of Beethoven which consisted of a series of photographic slides alongside a tape recording of the soundtrack. The thing that set me off was that in order to let the teacher know when to change slides there was this hooter noise on the soundtrack. You hear the hooter, it's time to go on to the next slide. At the time I did think if you've gone to the trouble to stage the photographs why didn't they just make a film and let us watch that instead? It all seemed a bit old fashioned to me. This ridiculous hooter noise that intruded on the soundtrack every few minutes made me smirk and I thought it would be funny to do a hand motion of squeezing the bulb of a bike hooter each time the noise appeared. Other kids in the class soon started to giggle as they started to notice me utilising my imaginary hooter. Obviously, Mrs Sharpe eventually saw what was causing the noises in the class and

immediately sent me out the room to stand in the hall. Once Beethoven had died and the presentation was over she came out and gave me a right rollicking in the hallway. She got so irate she started to poke me repeatedly with her long, sharp fingernails and eventually made me cry. It bloody hurt! My opinion of her being a witch didn't change.

It was while I was at Cliftonville that I met my new best friend, Adrian Singh, whose importance to this story will be evident further down the line. Adrian had gone to a different primary school to me, Stimpson Avenue - known as 'Stinkers Avenue' back then and probably still now - so we both arrived at Cliftonville as strangers. We only got to be friends because, by chance, we were seated on the same table by our new first form teacher, a lovely lady called Mrs Lumbis. Adrian was clever, he could do the '*Rubik's Cube*' in minutes which was always guaranteed to attract a circle of impressed kids in the playground. I could barely manage one side of the '*Rubik's Cube*'. Adrian was in all the top sets and his reports were always first class. He was the first person I knew who had '*Game and Watch*' games and he'd bring these into school for us to play with at break time. These were very basic arcade games released by Nintendo starting in 1980 and featured a single game on a liquid crystal display and were very limited in the graphics they could display. Each game also featured a clock, alarm or both. These calculator sized gizmos could only have one graphic in any one place on the screen. The illusion of animation was made by the display changing which graphic it was going to light up. If you held a '*Game and Watch*' screen at a certain angle you could see all the graphics that could be shown on the screen in one go, which would spoil the game somewhat as you could see all the possible graphics that the game could display. We would hang around outside the window of the staff room during break times and I would try and beat Adrian's scores. I don't think I ever did. He had at least three which included '*Fire*' (rel. 31 July 1980), '*Snoopy Tennis*' (rel. 28 April 1982) and '*Donkey Kong Jr.*' (rel. 26 October 1982). I never had my own '*Game and Watch*'. I didn't have any money. These things weren't cheap. They were selling in Argos for around £15.95 to £18.75 each (Autumn/Winter 1983 Catalogue No.20 page 244). What were you supposed to do once you got bored of the game? You had to go out and buy another. This was long before you could change the game yourself using a removable cartridge! Adrian would arrive at school with a new game every few weeks with the previous game never to be seen again. Because of this I gathered that the novelty wore off rather quickly. These early games are much sought after now and you'd probably have to apply for a bank loan should you want to own a full collection.

1980 was the first year that I avidly waited and watched each new episode of a television programme designed mainly for adults. Evidently, I was growing up and my tastes were changing. '*Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World*' was broadcast on UK television in September of that year and it was through watching this that my interest in all things weird and spooky really started. Each episode was book-ended by a segment featuring science fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke, in short sequences filmed in Sri Lanka. Gordon Honeycombe narrated the main part of each episode that would focus on things like unknown sea creatures, the Abominable Snowman, Lake Monsters, stone circles, U.F.O.'s, strange things that rained from the sky and stones that appeared to move by themselves in California's Death Valley. My Dad was interested in this sort of thing too so we would sit there and watch it together. I was starting to realise that strange and wonderful things happened that had even the cleverest of people perplexed.

In the meantime, Tootal Fashions had recently closed down and Dad was now working as a van driver for Edward Green and Son, a builder's yard situated at 24 Palmerston Road near the town centre. The company had been there as far back as 1937 so had been going a good few years. After a brief spell as a dinner lady at Cliftonville Middle School during my last year there Mum then moved to Barclaycard on Marefair to work part-time in the voucher input department between 6-10 in the evenings which she did for many years until moving to authorisation, working Monday to Friday. Mum then changed her hours as she couldn't be out of the house every weekday evening when we kids were at home causing havoc. Dad would have had a breakdown eventually had she not. Barclaycard was situated right in the town centre and occupied the huge site from 1971 up to 1995 when they relocated to the Brackmills Industrial Estate. The old premises was then demolished to make way for the Sol Central Entertainment Centre which currently houses, among others, Vue Cinema, a gym, various cafes and beauty salons. At first, she just worked in the mornings then changed her hours to accommodate afternoon shifts too. On her morning shifts she would leave me some money on the table, and I would come home from school at dinner time then walk up to the Oliver Adam's Bakery on the Wellingborough Road to buy our lunch. I'd get her a cheese and onion roll and two packets of crisps and an egg mayonnaise roll and one packet of crisps for myself. She would then arrive back home not long after me where she'd have a sit down and a brew then start on the housework after I'd gone back to school for the afternoon.

Other than the recent local murder I had lived a mainly carefree existence up to this point, oblivious to the nastier things that were going on in the world and being reported in the newspapers or on the television. When the news came on at teatime it usually meant it was now time to go out to play so I rarely

watched it. On Tuesday 9 December 1980 I was 10 years old when I really discovered the world could be an ugly place. Something happened that day that would change the way I thought about things forever. For on that day I witnessed the worldwide shock in reaction to the murder of ex-Beatle John Lennon in New York. It happened while I was asleep in bed. Some nutter, whose name I'm not mentioning, shot him four times in the back with hollow point bullets causing un-survivable injuries. Here in England it would have been around 03:50 am when this appalling act was committed. It affected me very deeply and I still don't really understand why. Pop stars had died before and I recall seeing a news report on the television about Elvis Presley dying a few years earlier in 1977 when I was 7 years old and the news of Marc Bolan's car crash passed me by – I'd never heard of him back then. I'd just had a bath and was sat in the front room at Allen Road wrapped in a towel on the sofa, it was still light outside, when I saw the news report about Elvis but he wasn't killed by another person. He wasn't murdered. Nothing before this had any sort of negative, long term, effect on me. News of John's murder was in all the papers and on the television for what seemed like months afterwards and I saw the effect it had directly on my Dad, who collected me from Cliftonville at midday on the day it happened to take me home for lunch in his white work van. He worked not far from my school so also popped home in his lunch hour. I sensed he wasn't his usual self and, after climbing into the front seat, I asked "What's the matter with you?" "John Lennon's been killed", he said and to that I replied, "Who's he?" I watched the news that dinner time and understood exactly what had occurred. When I got home following that afternoon's lessons it was all over the television and on every single channel. That in itself confirmed to me how important this John bloke must have been. That evening I watched The Beatles' film '*Help!*' from 1965 on BBC 1 with my Dad which was shown in tribute to John and that was it. I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. I had heard some of The Beatles songs before, just in passing, but I didn't really know much about the group. As well as liking all the songs I heard I found all four of them really funny, especially John. I wasn't a Beatles fan before that day and seeing all the coverage and watching the film that night turned me into one instantaneously. I soon had to stop myself from crying every time news of John's murder was on the television or when I heard him singing. I'm still angry about it now. The passage of time does nothing to quell the feeling of what a senseless and uncalled for act it was. For all John did over the years, good or bad, he certainly didn't deserve to get shot for it.

Fortunately for me, my Dad had all of The Beatles albums up to and including 1968's double LP, '*The Beatles*'; more widely known as simply '*The White Album*', due to its blank cover. These were all original mono sixties releases and he'd got most of them at the auction along with the seven-inch records we used to play through in the back room at Allen Road a few years earlier. Up to this point I'd paid no notice of those albums, so I spent the next six months blissfully picking my way through them in no apparent order and discovering the music of The Beatles. This process was life changing for me and I am still, and always will be, a huge fan of not only their work but their personalities as well. Even if you didn't like their music, one has to admit they were all great comedians. A bit later on, when we had our own video recorder, I started to scour the television listings and look out for even the tiniest film clip that I could record on to a VHS tape and watch back again and again. The novelty of being able to tape television shows then watch them back when you wanted and even, wait for it, pause the picture, took a few years to wear off. I watched a 25th anniversary of '*American Bandstand*' show on the television and Dick Clark introduced the next montage of clips and he said The Beatles were included. So, I pressed record on the video machine and there, right in the middle of the segment, was about four seconds of black and white footage from the '*Penny Lane*' promo from 1967. Back then there was virtually no Beatles footage shown on television as nine times out of ten Apple, their record company, would put the mockers on things with a threat of legal action and stop whatever TV station was showing it. So, these four precious seconds of 'new' Beatles footage was watched and rewound many, many times, such was the scarcity of any moving film footage of them at the time.

In 1981 I started to write letters to people I may have seen on the television or authors books I had read and enjoyed. The earliest record of a letter I had written was to David Attenborough. I had watched his ground-breaking '*Life on Earth*' television series that had been shown on BBC 2 from 16 January to 10 April 1979 and, as far as I was concerned, was the number one expert on Dinosaurs and fossils. To my amazement David replied with a handwritten letter. He wrote:

"19.3.81

Dear Mark Jones,

Thank you for your letter. I am delighted to know that you enjoyed the programmes so much. I quite understand your fascination with fossils. I too collected them when I was your age – and still do. I am afraid however that it is not possible to identify the one you drew just from a drawing.

With best wishes,

David Attenborough.”

Obviously, I had sent him a little drawing of some fossil I had found in some gravel in a car park somewhere and asked him if he knew what it was. Still, I was chuffed that this famous television personality who I had watched on the television with the rest of my family had written to me personally. I couldn't believe that he'd actually taken the time from his busy schedule to hand write me a personal letter!

Another letter I wrote was addressed to Roy Castle and Norris McWhirter of the BBC television children's show '*Record Breakers*', a show that I watched regularly after school. I had asked Roy if he could tell me if there was a world record for the most autographed letter by famous people. To my delight he too wrote back. The letter, dated April 1981, read as follows:

“Dear Mark,

Thank you very much for writing to Norris and myself here at “The Record Breakers”. Unfortunately there isn't a category in the Guinness Book of Records for the most autographed letter by famous people, but I thought you might like to know about the highest price paid for a signed autograph letter of a living person. It was \$6250 (then £2340) at the Hamilton Galleries on 1st December 1977 for a letter from ex-President Richard M. Nixon to a brigadier general dated 14th December 1971. What a lot of money! I'm also enclosing a photo of Norris and myself, where you can see me modelling the latest line in jackets for the man with the fuller figure!

With my very best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

ROY CASTLE”

Roy had signed the letter himself. The post card that accompanied it showed a photo of him wearing a huge suit with his little legs poking out from underneath. Norris was also in the photo pretending to be taking Roy's measurements with a tape measure. I treasured it and still have it safely filed away in a plastic wallet.

I also wrote to Barry Cox at the University of London King's College who had written my favourite book on dinosaurs – '*Purnell's Book of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Animals*' from 1977. I had been given the book a good few years before as either a birthday or Christmas gift and loved looking through it as some of the illustrations were very gory. It was my go-to book when I wanted to read about the animals that had ruled the earth millions of years before we humans had set foot on it. Barry wrote a nice letter back, dated 10 August 1981, and recommended some other books on the subject. At the same time, I had also written to author Richard Whittington-Egan who had edited a great book on the paranormal called '*The Weekend Book of Ghosts*'. He too took the time to write back:

“20th August 1981

Dear Mark,

Thank you very much for your interesting letter. I am so glad to hear you enjoyed our 'Weekend Book of Ghosts'.

We do not publish one every year, but we do expect to start on another in the not too distant future.

Thank you once again for writing,

Yours sincerely,

Richard Whittington-Egan”

By this time I was spending more and more of my free time with my cousin Hayden. He lived a bit further out of town than we did in a district called Weston Favell and I would take the 20p bus journey up past Abington Park to Ashley Way to where he lived most weekends. I would go to his house more than he'd come down to mine. Not sure why - though I think with their house being further out of town it made it easier to actually get out of town and into the countryside should we decide to go on a bike ride. If this was already planned I would cycle the journey up to his instead of taking the bus. Hayden was a little over a year younger than me and had an older brother and sister called Paul, born in 1967, and Helen, who followed the year after. His Mum and Dad, my Auntie Sue and Uncle John, had a bigger house than ours with a garden that was at least four times the size of any of the two gardens we'd had so far. They had a

cool little pond too that, once a year, would be host to a heaving mass of huge frogs who would then lay copious amounts of frog spawn. Many weekend summer afternoons were spent watching the hundreds of tadpoles swimming around while I had a glass of orange squash in hand. Auntie Sue, who is my Mum's sister, and Uncle John split up in the early 80s so I was to see less of him once he'd moved out of the marital home though he was a regular visitor to the house as his three children still lived there and remained on speaking terms with his ex-wife. One time, while playing swing ball in Hayden's garden on a particularly hot summer's day I experienced, for the first time ever, vomiting without feeling ill. It took me by complete surprise as, mid-game, a huge jet of orange squash projectile shot out of my mouth and onto the lawn. I thought it was hilarious and proudly informed Auntie Sue that I had just spewed and didn't feel at all poorly. As Hayden's house was near Weston Favell Shopping Centre, we would regularly wander over there, across the bridge surrounded by a round semi-see through covering and nose about in WHSmiths, looking at the magazines and seeing if they had any cool pencil cases or erasers to buy. There really wasn't much else for us to spend our pennies on that we could afford, other than things that we could use at school.

Once, we spotted actor Geoffrey Hughes wandering around the centre as part of some promotion he was doing. I knew him as Eddie Yates in *'Coronation Street'* and had watched him on the television, along with Hilda and Stan Ogden, with whom his character lived, on many occasions. I politely asked for his autograph and he handed me a promo photo of himself, but he signed it as his character, Eddie Yates, and not his real name. I wasn't very impressed. If I had known what I know now, that he provided the voice for Paul McCartney in the cartoon film version of *'Yellow Submarine'* in 1968, I may have been more forceful in asking him for a real autograph. Due to the fact the signature didn't bear the name he was born with I didn't keep hold of it for very long. It soon got lost.

Back at Hayden's and after whatever shenanigans we'd been up to that afternoon, Auntie Sue would usually dish up Heinz spaghetti and toast for both our teas. For years I couldn't work out why the toast I ate at hers tasted much nicer than the toast we had back at home. It only took me around thirty years to find out that she spread butter on it where at home we only had boring old margarine. Stork SB was the brand that we used the most – spread on Mother's Pride bread. Once the reason was clarified I now ensure that I put butter on my toast at home, not margarine – each occasion reminding me of those halcyon weekends long ago at Auntie Sue's house.

One of our main interests that took up most of our time at this point was fossil collecting. Me and Hayden would look for every opportunity to go scrabbling about in the quarry at Irchester Country Park or the clay pits at Castle Ashby, either with my parents or Uncle John, on the search for brachiopods and belemnites and, on special occasions, quartz crystals. We'd happily smash open rocks and think to ourselves, "I'm the first person in the world to ever see that" when the shards of broken limestone revealed a previously hidden remnant of a creature that had died and sunk to the bottom of the seabed millions of years ago. We worked out too that gravelled driveways of houses could yield a healthy crop of devil's toenails and more brachiopods and belemnites. If you were really lucky, you'd find a small piece of an ammonite, the most impressive fossil to find at these locations. There were a few gravelled gardens belonging to businesses – mainly solicitors and estate agents – along the Billing Road. As I walked past these on the way back from school and when I wasn't in a particular hurry to get home I would quickly check to see if no one was looking out the window of a particular business and spend twenty minutes or so with my eyes down, scanning the thousands of tiny rocks for something that resembled a pattern. If I could find a pattern amongst the thousands of tiny rocks it usually meant I'd found a fossil. Both Hayden and I amassed quite a nice collection of fossils from these exploratory hunts.

To make things more official, on Sunday 5 July 1981, we both started our own *'Club of Palaeontology'*. I have a certificate signed by the leader, Hayden, and stamped with the official club stamp which consisted of a circle of red paint that, once it had dried, I wrote on it to certify me becoming an official member of this esteemed and exclusive establishment. Our club was all about dinosaurs and fossils and we would scour the books on pre-historic life over at the library at Lings Forum in Weston Favell Shopping Centre and photocopy our favourite pages and stick them in our club books. My book looks like I had stolen a blank exercise jotter from school and used it for my drawings and short essays, which it also contained. The club had been going for a while before I started to fill the book in as the first entry is dated Friday 4 June 1982 and was entitled *'Nessie'*. It's all about the monster that supposedly lurks in Loch Ness in Scotland complete with drawings of what I thought the beast might look like. Also, in the book are a few drawings of dinosaurs I had made the year before that I'd had lying around, and this was as good a place as any to put them, so I stapled them in. Good job I did really as had I not done they would have probably been thrown away or lost many moons ago. Other pages contain quizzes we had set each other, short exercises on the Coelacanth, Iguanodon, Tyrannosaurus Rex, various fossils – Coral, Gastropods (snails), Lamellibranches (animals with shells like mussels and cockles), Brachiopods (animals with two valve

shells), Echinoids (sea urchins), Belemnites (squid like animals with pointed shells), Ammonites (squid like creatures with curled, circular shells), and Trilobites (animals that looked a bit like wood lice but lived in the sea). It just goes to show that by this time I was pretty good at wanting to find things out for myself that I was interested in. I now wasn't just relying on what I was force fed by my teachers at school and was expanding my knowledge independently.

Around this time, I bought a set of Dubreq 'Top Trumps' cards entitled 'Prehistoric Monsters'. 'Top Trumps' was (and still is) a card game first published in 1968 and the packs would contain pictures and information on various themes including military hardware, racing cars and modes of transport. Each card contained a list of numerical data and the aim of the game was to compare the values given and to 'trump' and win the other player's card. The photos contained on the thirty-two cards in my pack were of actual models of dinosaurs, they weren't paintings, and looked fantastic. The title card was adorned with an image of the mighty Tyrannosaurus Rex, surely every young boy's favourite dinosaur? My favourite image though was the one for the Ceratosaurus only because it showed the beast feasting on another fallen dinosaur's bloodied entrails. Once a few games had been had I got bored with the cards and stuck them into the back of my 'Club of Palaeontology' book. On the plus side, that ensured I didn't, over the years, lose or swap them with anyone but, by using sticky tape to affix them to the pages, I damaged them - the back of the cards eternally marked with the dry residue of the tape. Most of them are still firmly affixed to the page. A couple have fallen loose due to the age of the tape.

Hayden had somehow managed to get a reply to a letter he had sent to the Natural History Museum in London. It was written by a chap called C.P. Palmer who worked in the Department of Palaeontology. I was very jealous of the letter Hayden received, written on posh letter headed note paper, so I wrote an almost identical letter to Hayden's so that I could have a reply to keep and paw over. A few days later, hey presto, I got a reply from Mr Palmer but could see that he was slightly miffed as at the end of the letter, dated 3 August 1981, he had typed:

"If any of your friends, or members of your Club of Palaeontology, want to know how to become palaeontologists, both you and Hayden can tell them and show them your letters. They do not need to write to me."

Oops! He must have noticed the similarity of both of our letters and that we lived in the same town. The big bonus though was that he had sent me the best fossil ammonite I had ever seen along with his reply. It was beautiful and miles better than any fossil I'd managed to unearth myself. As things turned out I didn't get to own it for very long.

Another of mine and Hayden's hobbies was collecting and painting (badly) 'Citadel Miniatures'. The company made and continues to do so but not with the same materials, tiny, detailed figures that were supposed to be used in war gaming board games. We liked the trolls, orcs, elves and goblin type figures and had probably been inspired by 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings' books which Hayden had read and only I'd flicked through. Back then they were made of a white metal alloy, including lead, which was highly poisonous. Later and safer models were made of hard plastic. We would buy these from a revolving rack in The Model Shop on the Wellingborough Road along with various miniature bushes and trees that had been produced specifically for the scenery that people who owned train sets would make. I myself, didn't partake in any war gaming, so I would just paint the figures as best I could and place them on a diorama I'd made. Me, Hayden and his friend Aaron Robinson, who had also caught the collecting bug but was into the gaming side of things, all made a diorama each. We started off with a piece of square hardboard then built the terrain using chicken wire which we would then cover with strips of newspaper covered in glue. Once it had all dried, we then painted it until it looked something like scenery. The next step was to glue on the various bushes on that we'd bought from The Model Shop and would also furnish it with twigs we'd found in Hayden's garden for that extra added realism. These finished boards were pretty cumbersome though and not easy to take round someone else's house. It wasn't possible to carry one on the bus for instance, it was just way too big. I was very pleased with how mine had turned out. I'd modelled a cave and the remnants of a burning log fire made by physically setting light to a section. The main feature of mine though was a huge tower set right in the middle from which a plank came down to the top of a hill. I dotted glue about the ground and sprinkled fine dusting's of ground up mud and sand into it. We would act out scenarios on our own hand designed scenery, placing the various 'Citadel Miniatures' that we had bought, about the board. I ordered some new miniatures from the company itself and it was delivered directly to my house in a big cardboard box. I still have the box, but the contents are long gone so I have no idea of what I actually ordered any more. I wish I had the foresight to have taken a photo of my lovingly created diorama. It lasted about six months before I decided it took up too much room, covered it in lighter fuel and set fire to it in the garden.

One of the highlights of my entire school life happened due to the result of an essay I wrote in English on The Beatles sometime in 1981. Mr Smith had shown Mrs Sidwell, another teacher at the school, my written prose and one morning he called me over and said Mrs Sidwell wanted to see me in her office. Immediately I thought "Oh what have I done now?" and traipsed to her office just off the main entrance to the school. There on the table was a big pile of musty looking scrap books. She went on to tell me that she used to live in Liverpool and had been a massive fan of The Beatles when they played at the Cavern Club in Mathew Street in the early sixties. She passed me the first scrap book. In it was piles of press cuttings, original black and white photos which I've never seen before or since of The Beatles playing live and posing for photos. Also were lots of autographs, I was shaking a little when I realised I was actually handling bits of paper that John, Paul, George, Ringo and Pete had actually held in their own hands and written their names on. She had also taped in a piece of pork pie and toast that Paul had given her. She'd eaten most of it and saved a corner piece and stuck the remainder in her book. She told me that The Beatles had nick named her 'Laughing Annie' due to her being able to make George burst out laughing by staring at his feet while he was on stage. When Mark Lewishon's huge book '*The Beatles: All These Years: Volume One: Tune In*' was published in 2013 I was happy to see that Mrs Pat Sidwell had been interviewed for the book though, in 2005 when her interview took place, she was going by the name Pat Brady. In it she mentions the 'Laughing Annie' nick name that clarified to me she was my old teacher and, at the time of writing, was still alive and well. I still wonder where all her wonderful scrap books are now though!

I still fancied myself as a bit of a thespian while at Cliftonville, though I was still always as nervous as hell when the time came to go live in front of an audience, and took part in a total of three school plays during my time there. The first was a production of '*Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat*' by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. In it I played one of Joseph's brothers - Simeon - and remember that we all had to smear our bodies in brown paint in order to look like we'd been out in the sun and looked the part. It just wouldn't have looked right having a row of skinny pale schoolboys on stage trying to pass themselves off as people who lived in sun-drenched Egypt. This whole-body painting thing is something I don't think you'd even try and get away with nowadays due to how un-politically correct it would be.

As we had moved to a new house, I transferred to another Cubs group nearer to where we lived. It was too much of a trek up to Abington Avenue every Tuesday night and the thought of the walk was starting to put me off from attending. I was still enjoying it though and, when I reached 10 years of age, I became a Scout. The best thing about being in the Scouts was that we were now allowed to wear long trousers - Cubs could only wear shorts which was horrible in the winter due to how cold English winters could be. One weekend we all went on a Friday night stop over to a Scout Camp in the woods in Overstone, a village not far from Northampton. The plan was that we had to pair up with another Scout then build a shelter between us out of what we could find on the forest floor and then sleep the night in it. I built my shelter no problem but once I'd got my sleeping bag out to test how comfortable it would be and saw all the insects walking over the floor I had a sudden sense of panic come over me. I really didn't want to wake up with wood lice and ants crawling over my face or trying to get in my mouth or ears. I quickly changed my mind and wanted to be back home and in my own comfy and warm bed. I feigned being sick and got Mum and Dad to come and pick me up before darkness came. I had chickened out good and proper!

One Scout trip I went on was a Saturday morning visit to the Zoo. I can't recall which one it was exactly, but it would have been either Twycross or Whipsnade due to their geographical location compared to Northampton. Whilst there, we went and looked at the Chimpanzees and I was surprised to see they had been equipped with a working television installed behind a glass window. A group of Chimps were sat there and were watching Noel Edmonds on '*Swap Shop*', just like I would have been doing had I been at home that morning. I was amazed, the animals were actually sat there watching the television. Once back home I wrote off to '*Swap Shop*' and told Noel about his new viewers and, a few weeks later, he read out my letter on the show, taking me by complete surprise. He ended with a comment about how they try and attract and wide range of viewers, but this was something he'd not prepared for. I was flabbergasted. Once I'd got over the initial shock of hearing my name read out on national television on one of my favourite shows I put my trainers on and went out in the street on my bike. I was expecting droves of children to come out of their houses and ask if it was really me who wrote the letter they'd just heard read out on the television. I hung about for ten to fifteen minutes, riding round in circles in the road outside my house. No one came out. No one came up to me. I went back inside, put my bike away and continued watching television.

Soon though things started to sour for me at the Scouts as I became a victim of being bullied. I can remember who was doing the bullying but I'm not going to name him. It was enough though for it to have been noticed by one of the Scout leaders. One early evening he knocked on the door of our house and asked to speak to my Mum. He explained what had been going on and asked if he could take me around to his house to talk to me as I was obviously making out it wasn't as bad as it really was. He wanted to try and find out exactly what had happened and why. As he only lived in the next street my Mum agreed. This is

where things get odd and a bit blurry. I have really vivid memories of being in the Scout leader's living room. The curtains were drawn even though it wasn't really dark outside. His hi-fi system was playing a song unlike anything I'd heard before. I was into my Beatles and the track I was hearing didn't sound like what I'd call music at all. I remember the song sounding like a female talking over an engaged phone tone and it seemed to go on forever. There wasn't even any singing in it. I was kneeling on the floor and he was sitting on the sofa to my right - I can still see his knees, he had light brown trousers on - and, at some point, I was crying and hiding my face with my head on my arms that were folded on the sofa seat in front of me. I focused in on the graphic equalizer on the stereo system. I'd never seen one before. The red lights danced in time to the weird music that was playing, the darkness of the room enhancing their glow. Then, my mind goes completely blank until I make a rush to the front door to leave through floods of tears. Sounds a bit dodgy doesn't it? I have no idea what upset me so much to make me cry so badly. For years I wondered what the song was that was playing and was sure that if I could hear it again it would unlock in my mind some latent memories and, all of sudden, what had happened during the missing period would come back to me. Nearly thirty years later I discovered the name of the song I'd heard that night. It was 'O Superman' by Laurie Anderson which had been released in October 1981. Listening to it now makes me feel a bit weird. It could just be that it's a really strange song anyway and I'm reading too much into it. Or it might be that something untoward happened. The song didn't unlock anything from my mind either once I'd heard it again. The rest of that evening's events remain locked away. I just don't think that us talking about a bit of bullying would have resulted in me being as upset as I was. I did think about getting myself hypnotized then regressed to try and solve my own personal mystery once and for all. I was advised that, if my mind really had hidden away some negative memories, then it had done so for a really good reason and they probably should just stay that way. (<https://youtu.be/Vkfp2H8tOE>)

Christmas 1981 came and with my money I bought my first very diary and it has survived to this day in one piece, as have all my diaries, though most were only written in sparingly throughout the relevant year. The diary was a 'Junior Mirror Diary' published by Mirror Books in conjunction with Daily Mirror newspaper. It was only three inches by five inches, so the writing contained within it is microscopically small. Obviously I had to write at that size to enable me to record all those vital and life affirming details about the day's events like, for instance, the time I woke up, whether I had a packed lunch or school dinner that day, what I had for tea (though most of the entries just say 'Had tea' some do actually document what exactly tea consisted of) and, most exciting of all, what time I went to bed. I didn't keep it up for the whole of the year though and entries peter out by Monday 23 August. While not the most exciting of reads now it does record some interesting snippets like, for example, what my school timetable consisted of for the year. I was in my third year at Cliftonville and my current form tutor was the English teacher at the school, a nice chap called Mr Tarry. The timetable shows that Tuesday was my favourite day of the week as we had a double period of art all afternoon. I would have considered this bliss as I never saw art as hard work, whereas geography, maths and French were. I did look forward to history, science and English though. A physical education (P.E.) lesson was hit and miss as I hated football and cross country but loved being in the gym where we got to climb ropes, play basketball and throw medicine balls at each other. I had two left feet when it came to football though. I could never kick the ball in a straight line so always ended up volunteering to be in defence. I didn't have to do much in defence other than try and kick the ball in the opposite direction when it came anywhere near me. As long as it moved away from the goal I wasn't shouted out by the other players on my team. There was virtually no need to pass the ball to anyone specific. When the ball was at the other end of the pitch I had ample time to stand around chatting to whoever was in defence with me. I had done well at Barry Road during swimming lessons and had earned quite a few certificates but, unfortunately, Cliftonville didn't have access to a pool so me and my school mates had to do without any swimming lessons for the next four years which was a bit of a downer.

| Hours | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|-------|------------------------------|-----------|------------|---|------------|---|----------|---|
| Mon | English → | | Humanities | | P.E. → | | Music → | |
| Tues | English/French/Maths → | | | | Art → | | Art → | |
| Wed | Maths → | | Science → | | Games → | | Art → | |
| Thu | Maths → | | English → | | Humanities | | R.E. → | |
| Fri | English/French | English → | | | Science → | | French → | |
| Sat | WE DO NOT GO TO SCHOOL TODAY | | | | | | | |

Monday 28 December 1981

"Woke up 9:45. Made Mum and Dad a cup of coffee. Went to town with broken microscope. Bought a chemistry set and this diary. Came home at 3. Done some experiments. Made my own chemical called

'copper carbonate'. Had dinner (late). Watched Grange Hill and 'Close Encounters of the 3^d Kind'. Went to bed at 9:55. Good film."

The microscope had been my main present three days earlier and was found to be unusable once I'd ripped the wrapping paper from the box and assembled it all in order to try it out (a *'Microscope Lab 2'* retailing at £14.99). This, as any child knows, is a complete disaster. I would have had to make do with all my secondary presents that day, that years *'Jackpot'* annual and a *'Beware the Spider'* board game, and I would have been in quite a grump about it. The microscope was taken back to Argos, which was then situated on Abington Square, and, to add insult to injury, the shop didn't have any more in stock (could Christmas get any worse?) so a straight swap wasn't possible. Gutted as I was that I wasn't going to be able to look at flakes of skin, dead flies, ants and ear wax magnified a thousand times; I opted for a Chemistry Set instead (*'Chemistry 4'*, retailing at £9.99 – giving Mum a £5 refund!). I couldn't possibly go home empty handed that day so had to make a quick alternative choice on the spot. Anything that involved setting fire to things and chemicals would have proved highly attractive to an eleven-year-old boy in 1981. Once I'd got the set home and had a play around with it I proudly recorded in the diary that I had made my own chemical, Copper Carbonate. This had been achieved by mixing two other chemicals together and burning the concoction in a test tube under the little glass bowl with a rope wick that passed as a makeshift Bunsen burner, once it was filled with a small amount of purple methylated spirit. I also had great fun lighting the strips of magnesium that were supplied in the set and was amazed at how brightly they burned. It was blinding and emitted a white flame, something I'd not seen before. I'm sure Mum and Dad must have been a little bit worried as I was well known now as a bit of a pyromaniac and would try burning anything I could get my hands on just to see what happened. I'm surprised that I managed to avoid causing a serious fire. One of my favourite combustible materials was balls of cotton wool. Once lit, they made globes of purple fire and looked mightily impressive. When I wasn't eating spoonful's of sugar I was setting fire to them. The sugar burned and bubbled away, turning to a brown liquid first, then black until it extinguished itself and left a crisp, hard residue on the spoon which wasn't easy at all to remove afterwards. This made hiding my shenanigans from Mum difficult as I then had to scrub the spoon I had used really hard with a metal scourer to remove all traces of the burnt material. Many cups of tea were made at Lutterworth Road with spoons containing stubborn traces of black, burnt sugar on them.

Thursday 31 December 1981

"Woke up at 8:20. Done some experiments. Watched TV. Mum and Dad at work. Leanne and Nicole at Nana Jones's. Watched TV and did some drawings. Mum, Leanne and Nicola came home at 2:10. Went to Auntie Linda's. Came home at 4:00. Went up to Auntie Ann's to sleep the night. Mum and Dad went to see Cannon and Ball. Had chips for tea. I stayed up to see the New Year in. Went to bed 12:10."

Only just though. I lasted ten minutes more before giving into tiredness. I must have been exhausted. I never normally stayed up that late!

THOSE WE LOST IN 1979 TO 1981:

Sid Vicious – 2 February, 1979.

Ian Curtis – 18 May, 1980.

John Bonham – 25 September, 1980.

John Lennon – 9 December, 1980.

Chapter 4: 1982

“I'm not wearing them if they're pink!”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'The Dark Crystal' – Jim Henson and Frank Oz, 17 February.
- 'Poltergeist' – Tobe Hooper, 4 June.
- 'E.T. the Extra Terrestrial' – Steven Spielberg, 11 June.
- 'Firefox' – Clint Eastwood, 18 June.
- 'Tron' – Steven Lisberger, 9 July.
- 'The Thing' – John Carpenter, 25 June.
- 'Blade Runner' – Ridley Scott, 25 June.
- 'Pink Floyd – The Wall' – Alan Parker, 15 July.
- 'Creepshow' – George A. Romero, 12 November.

Wednesday 6 January 1982

“Woke up 8:45. Watched TV. Had dinner at 12:30. Auntie Linda came up with Joanna and the two dogs. Went up to Hayden's 2:30. Watched 'The Intelligence People' on video. Went swimming at Lings. Went home at 5:30. Watched TV. Went to bed 9:00.”*

(*one of my other cousins)

Thursday 7 January 1982

“Woke at 8:00. Watched TV. Had dinner 12:25. Hayden came down my house for afternoon. Went down graveyard. Met 2 friendly grave diggers covering up a grave. Got legged by 2 kids. Went home. Found 10p. Bought some sweets. Had tea. Watched TV. Done some chemistry. Watched TV. Went to bed 9:00. P.S. Hayden went home 5:10.”

Monday 11 January 1982

“Mum's 100th Birthday (He He)*

Back to school. Woke up at 7:30. Left for school 8:30. Had English and Humanities. Had packed lunch. Still snowy. Had snowball fight outside. Came in 1:15. Went home 4:00. Watched TV. Had dinner 5:10. Watched TV. Went to bed 8:30.”

(*Mum was actually 32!)

Friday 15 January 1982

“Woke up at 7:00. Left for school 8:45. Had English then French then English again. Had school dinner today. Went home 12:00 'cause heating wasn't working. Watched TV. Had dinner 6:30. Watched TV. Went to bed 10:30.”*

(*I wish now I'd written down what I'd actually been watching on TV instead of being lazy!)

Sunday 17 January 1982

“Woke up 7:30. Watched TV. Had dinner 1:15. Watched a Carry On film called 'Carry On Teacher' (1960). Went up to Nana and Granddad Jones for afternoon at 4:30. Went home 7:30. Watched TV. Went down cellar. Had a bath. Went to bed 8:30.”

I thought the following event important enough to record when, on Monday 18 January, I: *“broke friends with Adrian.”*

The reason being? *“'cause he tricked me.”*

As to what he actually did to me is lost in the mists of time. It must have been a dastardly deed to result in us becoming enemies though, but it didn't last long as, three days later, the diary reads: *“Made friends with Adrian.”*

Wednesday 27 January 1982

“Woke up at 7:30. Left for school 8:47. Had Assembly. Then had English, French and Science. Got kicked in by 6 other 3rd years. Didn't do games 'cause I could not walk. Had Art. Went home. Had dinner. Watched TV. Went to bed 9:00.”*

(*I have no idea why the lessons mentioned don't match up to the timetable. It could be that I amalgamated some of Tuesday's and Wednesday's lessons together. I was probably tired when I wrote it.)

I have no recollection now of what happened in regard to being "kicked in". It couldn't have been that bad as I have no memory of this heinous event now. I was most probably making a mountain out of a molehill. By the next day though I was properly milking it.

Thursday 28 January 1982

"Woke up 7:45. Left for school 8:30. Had Maths. Didn't do English 'cause someone kicked me on a muscle (yesterday) that was near my shoulder blade and each time I moved my arm it hurt. Had dinner. Then had Humanities and R.E. Went home 4:00. Bused it. Watched TV. Had dinner. Watched TV. Wrote Wednesday and Thursday's entries. Went to bed 8:30."

Well, there I am succeeding in getting out of English due to a damaged muscle. Really? P.E. I can imagine yes. I couldn't possibly jump and frolic around if I'd suffered muscle damage but English? Maybe it hurt to lift a pen or turn a page, the damage inflicted by the six ruffians being so severe. Adrian and I fell out again on Friday 29 January. This episode lasted as long as the weekend (where we probably never even saw each other hence its length) as the diary notes that we were mates again on Monday.

Monday 1 February 1982

"Woke up 7:10. Left for school 8:40. Had English and Humanities. Got 2 house points. Had school dinner. Had P.E. Made friends with Adrian. Nearly had a broken finger. Went home. Bused. Had dinner 5:10. Watched TV. Went to bed 8:30."

Saturday 6 February 1982

"Woke up at 8:00. Went to the Saturday Morning Cinema Show at ABC. Went with Adrian. Nicola came as well. Had dinner. Went to Hayden's. Watched film called 'Halloween'. Very scary and bloody (watched it on video). Swapped book for George III coin. Went home. Watched TV. Went to bed 9:00."

One of Hayden's relatives had dug up a George III cartwheel penny dated 1799 with a metal detector and had given it to Hayden. I really wanted it so swapped my 'Purnell's Book of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Animals' from 1977 for it. Just over thirty years later Hayden and I would swap the very same coin and book back! The Dinosaur book being far more interesting for my older self to look through than two sides of an old coin!

My diary records a few times throughout the year that I went to the 'Saturday Morning Cinema Show' at the ABC cinema in town. This was the only cinema in Northampton so we sometimes ventured there see the latest films and for something to do on the occasional Saturday morning. You had a compère, probably called 'Uncle Charlie' or something similar, who would start off by getting kids to sing along with the theme tune (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9s_SJtzVks) then, those that had birthdays that week, would be hauled up on to the stage. There was no way of knowing if they were all actually being honest about it being their birthday. I did think a few times, "Wasn't that person up there a few weeks ago?" The fortunate birthday girl/boy was usually given, as a birthday gift, a free ticket for the next week's show. The host would then lead us through a song or two, during which I never joined in, before some cartoons were shown followed by, more often than not, a C.F.F (The Children's Film Foundation) film. All C.F.F. films started off with a short company ident film showing pigeons flying off from Trafalgar Square in London and the films that followed, which were usually pretty entertaining, involved children getting in to scrapes, helping the police catch villains or solving mysteries. Basically, most of them were live versions of the cartoon 'Scooby Doo' and dated from the early to late 70s (the longer the hair was over the ears and the bigger the flared trousers being worn by the kids in the film the older the film was). Various friends accompanied me to the 'Saturday Morning Cinema Show' including Adrian, Darren Masters, Hayden and Stephen Hanwell. One diary entry regarding a trip to the cinema, after I'd written that I'd gone with Stephen, is the word "ginger" as there were two Stephen Hanwell's. The other one spelt his name as Steven. He had black hair. This Stephen was ginger. These details were important back then! Ginger Stephen had a head of thick hair and when his mop was nearing the time to necessitate a trip to the barber's it made his head look bigger than everyone else's. This earned him the nick name of Stephen 'Headswell' Hanwell. Kids can be so cruel sometimes. Sorry Stephen.

Around this time a new magazine was being advertised on the television that looked right up my street. It was Orbis Publishing's 'The Unexplained'. I was already interested in weird and scary things and

this was all about the paranormal and mysteries of the world such as ghosts, the yeti, U.F.O.'s and grossness like spontaneous human combustion. As well as getting issue two free with the first there was also an amazing free flexi-disc that supposedly contained recorded voices of the dead. I was growing up. I wanted to find out about these things and, up to now, hadn't read or heard much about it.

Friday 12 February 1982

"Woke up 7:15. Left for school 8:50 (Bused it). Had lessons. Had school dinner. Had afternoon lessons. Went home. Bought no. 1 of The Unexplained. Got no.2 and spooky record free (voices from the dead). Had dinner 5:30. Watched TV. Wrote this. Went to bed 10:10."

I sat at home that night with the headphones connected to the family stereo and put the needle on the flimsy disc. While I thumbed the pages of my two new magazines I listened to the creepiest sounds that I'd ever heard in my life. Far away voices, almost all of them speaking a foreign language, surrounded by static and crackles and repeated three or four times "to help the ear adapt itself to the strange rhythm, rapidity and softness of the voice entity speech", as told to us by the narrator on the disc. Even the narrators sounded like old fashioned, stuffy, Victorian schoolteachers which, I suppose, added to the spookiness of the contents. Was this really dead people speaking? The record did creep me out a lot but I couldn't stop listening to it. I was soon able to repeat all the supposed ghostly utterances myself as I'd listened to them so many times. "Zenta!", "Raudiv", "Konstantin pluij", "Koste, tu tik nah", "Danka. Gute morning" and "Mark you. Make believe my dear, yes!", the last voice allegedly coming from the spirit of Sir Winston Churchill, echoed through my mind while trying to get to sleep for many months after. It was my second real delve into the world of the unknown and I loved it. You too can be terrified as it's online here, just don't click on it in the dark: <https://youtu.be/QRGZQ8H2-0A>

The next day I went up to Hayden's and was all ready to tell him about the day's exciting purchase but he'd already got himself a copy so we had a joint listening session during which we creeped Auntie Sue out, who told us to "Stop listening to that horrible record!" The next weekend on Sunday 21 February I went over to Steven Hanwell's house in Roseholme Road, he'd also had bought the magazine and record so we put it on again and then tried to make some recordings of our own. We held what we thought was a proper séance but we obviously didn't know what we were doing as the play through of our resultant tape recording afterwards proved. There were no voices on the resultant sound recording other than our own.

Both I and Hayden had continued to write to C.P. Palmer at the Natural History Museum in London. He had obviously warmed to both me and Hayden over the last few months because around February of 1982, we proudly informed him that he was now an honorary member of our 'Club of Palaeontology'. We were now both on first name terms and were referring to him as Phil in our letters. The formalities had been dropped when he explained to us that his first name was Charles but no one referred to him by that and was known by his middle name. Phil started to give us projects to do and we would send him quizzes to test his knowledge and to see if we could discover something that we knew and he didn't. The letters that came back from him were adorned with all sorts of little drawings and it was amazing that someone who was a real Palaeontologist and worked in such an important place was taking the time to read our scrawly letters and actually wrote back to us.

Saturday 27 March 1982

"Woke up 7:30. Went to Stamp and Coin Fair. Bought 7 coins. Walked home. Had dinner. Watched TV. Saw about 400 motorbikes along Welly Road (protest about the law that you have to wear crash helmets). Watched TV. Had tea 6:30. Anne and Pas Renda came. Went to bed 9:30. Wrote this."*

(*friends of Mum and Dad.)

Sunday 28 March 1982

"Woke up 8:30. Tidied my bedroom up. Went to Billing for the afternoon. Went with Hayden and Uncle John. Came home. Had tea. Had bath. Watched James Bond film 'The Spy Who Loved Me'. Good. Went to bed 9:30. Wrote this. Went to sleep. Woke up 200 times. Went back to sleep 199 times. Went to London. Came back. Went to sleep. Done homework. Went back to sleep. Really it was a boring night."

In the middle of the year, Phil invited us both down to London to come and see behind the scenes at the Natural History Museum. We were so excited by this and soon arranged the trip down, accompanied by Auntie Sue, and were treated like special guests as we had to ask at the front desk of the museum for Phil Palmer. "Is he expecting you?" we were asked. "Yes, he knows we're coming", we replied proudly. "He'll be down in a minute". Phil soon appeared, greeted us and proceeded to take the three of us behind the

scenes at the museum and showed us lots of exhibits that were held there but not on display to the general public. It was a really fantastic day and I will always be grateful to Phil Palmer for making two boys feel very special that day. In the meantime, I had written another letter to David Attenborough and had sent him the beautiful fossil ammonite that Phil Palmer had gifted me the year before. I wanted to know if he could date it for me. I really wanted to find out how old it was and was hoping the expert of experts could tell me. I should have just asked Phil Palmer because David didn't write back. I guess he must have been sick of me sending him fossils through the post which he'd then have to post back at his own expense. I never saw my ammonite again. I didn't write another letter to Mr Attenborough again after that. I was horrified at the thought I might have annoyed him and was a little bit miffed that he'd kept my lovely fossil which was now probably on display on a shelf somewhere in the Attenborough household.

Less than a month later I was a lead in a second school production in which I had bigger role to play. This one was the final of three plays the school was putting on by Geoffrey Chaucer. I took on the role of Stab in 'The Pardoner's Tale', one of the 'Canterbury Tales' and it was, again, produced by Mr Tarry. My diary notes that the first rehearsals occurred on the afternoons of Monday 29 March and Wednesday 31 March. In my diary for Thursday I note:

Thursday 1 April 1982

"April fool's day. Woke up 7:00. Did not go to school 'cause of ankle. Watched TV. Got issue 8 of 'The Unexplained'. Had pot noodle. Watched TV. Learnt lines for school play. Watched Kenny Everett. Went to bed 9:00. Went to sleep. Good night."

One last rehearsal took place on the Friday 2 April, the last day of school before a two-week break. Back to school and more rehearsals occurred on Monday 19 April, then every day from Wednesday 21 April to Friday 23.

Wednesday 5 May 1982

"Woke up 6:20. Left for school 8:30. Biked it. Missed maths 'cause of play rehearsal. Had science. Had dinner. Had lessons. Went home. Had tea. Went to Overstone with Scouts. Went home. Went to bed 10:00."

Another rehearsal occurred the day after but first I had a school holiday to go on so I didn't attend. The holiday ran from the 10 to 14 May and me and my classmates went to Wales with Mr Matthews, our history teacher, and Mrs Walton, a very strict but usually fair, maths teacher. This was my first time away anywhere without my family so it was a big deal for me and most of the other who came. We travelled there by train and once at our destination we lodged at some chalets on Shell Island which is a peninsula lying west of Llanbedr in Gwynedd. While on holiday we saw another side to Mrs Walton that endeared her to us a little as we discovered she did have a fun and softer side as she wasn't as strict with us while on holiday as she was in the classroom. Mrs Walton couldn't half shout and had the meanest 'death stare' that she would deliver should you dare to upset her during her maths lessons. We saw none of this while in Wales, even when she had to come into the boys' room and tell us all to quieten down and stop messing around one evening when we were supposed to be going to sleep. Everyone was expecting a right rollicking as the light came on and there she was at the door looking highly displeased, but she just told us to "Settle down and go to sleep!" We were allowed quite a bit of freedom while away, visiting a slate mine and my first ever real castle, Harlech, which is situated in Gwynedd. Constructed between 1282 and 1289 by Edward I during his invasion of Wales it gave Mr Matthews the chance to bring part of his history lessons to life and show off some of his heritage, this being the land of his forefathers. Being my first time ever in Wales my diary recorded that it had "*beautiful countryside*" as I had never seen hills and mountains like that before, only in books. It all certainly looked a lot different to Northampton where the biggest hill I'd experienced was 'Tank Hill' in Abington Park, which didn't even reach the equivalent height of a house. On the Wednesday of the holiday Alistair Fruish and I were allowed to stay behind on our own to do a drawing of a bridge while everyone else went pony trekking. Why we both wanted to do that I'll never know. I'd take the pony trekking now any day!

Monday 10 May 1982

"Go on school trip to Wales. Woke up at 7:30. Left for Wales 10:45. Got on train 11:25. Changed trains at Rugby, Coventry, Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury. Arrived at Wales 6:00. Went to our dormitories. Had a walk. Beautiful countryside. Had a coke and a Marathon. Had shower. Went bed 9:30."

Tuesday 11 May 1982

“Woke up at 6:00. Went to the slate mines 1873-1906. Went for a walk in the village. Then went for a hill walk. Went for swim in Arto River. Played out in the harbour. Done some work. Had some coke and Crunchie and Marathon. Went to bed 9:00.”

Wednesday 12 May 1982

“Woke up 5:20. Went to Shell Island. Ace. Had a paddle in sea. Me and Alistair done a drawing of a bridge while the others went pony trekking. Done some work. Had tea which was a salad. Went to bed 9:00.”

Thursday 13 May 1982

Woke up 5:30. Went to Shell Island again. Went to Harlech Castle. Took some photos. Got some souvenirs. Went for a paddle in sea. Got soaked. Had dinner. Went for a barbecue with another school. Had a hot dog. Walked home. Got stuff packed. Went bed 10:30.

Friday 14 May 1982

“Woke up at 6:55. Had a doss. Got Julian soaked (but he soaked us). Got on train, Changed trains at Shrewsbury, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Rugby. Got home. Watched TV. Had dinner. Watched TV. Went to bath. Went to bed 8:30.”

Back in Northampton and back at school the rehearsals for the new play recommenced on Wednesday 19 May which, unfortunately, made me miss a maths lesson. I'm sure I was really upset about that! I really loved being involved in this particular play as it involved violence and murder but became a little bit worried when Mr Tarry informed us that, as part of the costume, all three of us lead parts would have to wear a pair of tights. My main concern was that Mr Tarry was going to make me wear pink tights and cause me great embarrassment. I said to him on numerous occasions before I'd seen our final stage costumes that “I'm not wearing them if they're pink!” to which he repeatedly assured me they wouldn't be. ‘*The Pardoner's Tale*’ culminates in all three main actors dying violent deaths on stage. My two other cohorts were Hodge – played by Domenico D'Agostino and Sly – played by Neil Donaldson, who had been in the choir with me back at Barry Road. The gist of the play was that Hodge and I conspired to murder Sly by stabbing him to death. Unbeknownst to us Hodge had already poisoned us both earlier on and all three deaths then occurred on stage all at the same time. I suggested to Mr Tarry, Neil and Domenico that I go to the Joke Shop on the Wellingborough Road and buy 'blood capsules' for Neil and 'frothing at the mouth capsules' for me and Domenico, to which they all agreed. Again, two performances took place, the first on Wednesday 26 May and the second the evening after. So, up there on stage, in front of all those horrified parents, Neil was stabbed in the belly by yours truly. He then collapsed to the floor while spitting blood all over the stage floor followed by me and Domenico following suit seconds after as we both start frothing at the mouths like rabid dogs as the poison took hold, dribbling out on to the floor and making a right mess. It must have been a wonderful sight for the parents sat out in the audience to see! My diary notes cheerfully that both nights had been “a success”.

A photo exists that was most probably snapped at the dress rehearsal for the play that shows all three of us on stage in our stage costumes. The bottom half of my face had been covered in a light covering of black shoe polish to make me look like I hadn't shaved for days. Domenico and I look on while Neil, who is on his knees, collapses after being stabbed. I have a look of absolute glee on my face as Neil had used one of the blood capsules to gauge its effectiveness. His outstretched hands are covered in fake blood. In my right hand I'm holding a real knife, one I still own today. You just would not be allowed to do that nowadays in this world of Health and Safety. Back in those days teachers recognised that pupils had more than enough common sense and I doubt that Mr Tarry was worried that I would really stab Neil with the knife. If I had done so, it would have easily killed him. At some point during rehearsals I would have said to Mr Tarry “Of course I won't really stab Neil!” and that was enough to put him at ease. And in case you were wondering, Neil's tights were light blue, Domenico's dark blue and mine, purple. I needn't have been worried. None of us ended up having to wear pink tights.

One summer's evening, around 7-8pm, Darren Masters and I were playing out on our bikes when we ventured to the old allotments at the back of the lower end of Barry Road. Here there was a waste ground that used to be used to grow vegetables but was now a mess and surrounded by ugly garages that belonged to the occupants of the houses they backed on to. It wasn't a very scenic place to be and around the same time, when Northampton had been the hunting ground for a prolific cat killer, was where we found the corpses of two of his victims. One had been cut in half and the other had a wire around its neck which

looked like it had been used to strangle the poor thing. Both had been burned. This particular evening Darren and I were just riding about the alleyway without a care in the world when we saw a man stood near us dressed in leathers and standing next to his motor bike that was turning over. He appeared to be struggling with something. He called us over. "Boys. Do you think one of you could help with my zip? I really need the loo and I can't get it open". There was an uncomfortable silence as we tried to make sense of what he'd just asked us. We both exchanged embarrassed glances as smirks arrived on our faces and we saw that the man was actually struggling to open his fly. I piped up first, "I won't but my mate will!" I quickly started to bike off leaving Darren behind without a second glance or a thought to the possible horrendous consequences of me leaving Darren alone with this pervert. I exited the alleyway and soon saw, thankfully, that Darren had followed me. We sniggered at what the stranger had asked us as we made the short journey back to my house. Upon arriving I told Mum what had happened. I thought it was funny. She didn't and called the police who soon arrived to take a statement from us. They went looking for him but, unsurprisingly, he was long gone. The reality of what night have happened if one of us had taken the man up on his request didn't even cross my mind until many years later.

A summer weekend at Hayden's sometimes meant a trip out with Uncle John and Hayden's brother Paul. Paul would have one of his friends tag along, either Stephen Westley or Julian Morris, and we would venture over to Billing Aquadrome, Overstone Solarium or a country park. Billing and Overstone both had outdoor swimming pools so if it was a particularly warm day we'd end up at one of those for a swim and a bit of a sunbathe. During the car journey's we took turns at choosing what music to have on the car stereo. We would have our choice on one way and Paul and his mate would have theirs on during the other. Of course, we always had The Beatles on when it was our turn so the car would be filled with the likes of '*She Loves You*' (rel. 23 August 1963), '*Can't Buy Me Love*' (rel. 16 March 1964) and '*Help!*' (rel. 23 July 1965) but Paul was into strange and, what sounded like to me at the time, awful music. During this period Paul and his friends had massive mops of hair that they would spend hours crimping with heated tongs. I thought they were ridiculous and that it made them look like they were wearing wigs made out of straw. I would always get ready to stick my fingers in my ears during Paul's turn as his tapes would contain songs by bands I'd never heard of like Joy Division, early Thompson Twins and, the song I remember the most, one called '*Nag Nag Nag*' by Cabaret Voltaire (rel. April 1979 - <https://youtu.be/N-lixTxKETU>). At the time I thought that to call this assault on my ear drums music was a joke. This wasn't a song! The backing track sounded like a hundred people dragging their nails down a blackboard along with a man shouting over it. "This isn't singing!" me and Hayden exclaimed loudly and repeatedly. It went for ages and ages and we'd sit in the back of the car making sarcastic comments until Paul got so annoyed that one of us, usually Hayden, would get a slap or a punch.

Billing Aquadrome is a 235-acre leisure park at Great Billing in the eastern district of Northampton. We'd been there a few times already for family trips out in the seventies with my sisters and Mum and Dad. There was a small funfair there of which the only ride worth going on was the Dodgems. It was also host to a caravan park and an outdoor swimming pool that had wooden huts for patrons to change in and out of their costumes. The water in the pool wasn't heated so there always the risk of a fatal heart attack upon entering it for the first time as it was always so cold. This is where I learned that it's just best to jump straight into a cold pool rather than walk in slowly which was much more uncomfortable to endure. If we had enough money we'd splash out on some doughnuts that we watched being cooked on a conveyor belt before being soaked in sugar. We bought '*Fruit Salads*' and '*Black Jack*' penny sweets from the ticket kiosk and sometimes would splash out on a packet of '*Rainbow Drops*'. On occasion we'd take Uncle John's dinghy out on the lake and visit '*Duck Doo Islands*' – named by us because they were, literally, covered in bird shit.

It was at the Aquadrome where I first experienced stepping foot inside an amusement arcade. The machines that were there at the time included '*Space Invaders*' (1978) and '*Pac Man*' (1980) cabinets. There was a game called '*Boot Hill*' (1977) that was black and white and looked ancient even by 1982's standards. '*Carnival*' (1980), '*Galaxian*' (1979), '*Scramble*' (1981), '*Mr. Do!*' (1982) and '*Asteroids*' (1981) machines were also there in abundance. Later on, I remember seeing '*Bomb Jack*' (1984) to which I paid particular attention to as the game used The Beatles' song '*Lady Madonna*' for the musical accompaniment on one of the levels. The smell of the candy floss machine, hot dogs and the cooking sugared doughnuts all added to the overall atmosphere of the place.

Overstone Solarium, a caravan park near the village of Sywell, was a bit more upmarket than the Aquadrome. The outdoor pool here, built in the 1950s, was in better condition than the one at Billing and was furnished with nicer changing rooms. There wasn't a funfair or any arcades at Overstone though and the only place you could buy anything to eat or drink from was the one over-priced on-site shop. Many fun filled and hot Saturday and Sunday afternoons were spent at Overstone though on nearly every trip Paul, or his friend Julian, would half drown either me or Hayden 'for a laugh'.

On Tuesday 27 July 1982 I wrote an 'official report' on the expanding membership of our 'Club of Palaeontology' in my book:

**"Reports on Members
By Mark Jones.**

Hayden Andrews:

H.A. Is a very good member of our club, he has a lot of books and good fossils. He knows a lot of things about early life and dinosaurs. He is sometimes a bit (well you know what I mean) but not all the while. He started the club and made me second leader. 100%.

Mark Jones:

I'm writing this report so I can't write mine. 100%.

Alan Packwood:

A.P. is another good member. I don't know him very well but I have seen his fossil collection. He has some trilobites and lots of good ammonites and lots more. He is also clever on fossils. 100%.

Ral?:

R.? I hardly know him at all but from what I've heard he isn't very clever on fossils but he wants to learn (that's all right with us). His score is 40%.

Aaron Robinson:

A.R. Is clever and has a lot of knowledge on fossils. He has some good fossils and a few cavemen tools. His is an ace member to the club. His score for 1982 was 100%.

Leanne Jones:

L.J. Is quite a good member. She has left the club and joined it after a short while on numerous occasions. She knows quite a lot on fossils. Her score for 1982 is 90%.

C.P.Palmer:

C.P.P. Is our oldest member. He works at the Natural History Museum and we give him information through letters. He is a nice guy and is an official palaeontologist. His score for 1982 is 100%."

The club carried on until the end of the year when we just ended up forgetting about it. There was no big announcement or closing down ceremony. I think we just got bored with it and had found other interests.

Saturday 2 October brought our second interaction with the world of live TV broadcasting. 'Swap Shop' had finished for good at the end of its October – March season the year before as its presenter, Noel Edmonds, had left to concentrate on his new Saturday night programme 'The Late Late Breakfast Show'. 'Swap Shop's replacement, 'Saturday Superstore', started today. Presented by Radio DJ Mike Read it followed a similar format to its predecessor while also featuring co-presenters Sarah Green and two TV stars who had also formed part of the team on 'Swap Shop', John Craven and Keith Chegwin. Cheggers had been roped in again to go out and about to a different town each week and carry out a roadshow where members of the public could be invited on stage to make fools of themselves, special guests would turn up and bands would mime their latest 45rpm single. For 'Saturday Superstore's debut Northampton had been chosen for the roadshow segment and Keith and his crew had set up in Weston Favell on a spare bit of ground next to the shopping centre (just about where McDonalds is now). Me and Leanne went up on the bus and managed to squeeze our way right to the front where we watched Cheggers do his stuff for the second time though no swapping of old toys was involved. To be honest it wasn't actually that much fun. The weather wasn't that great and Keith's sections were pretty short and infrequent. That didn't matter at home as we'd watch the in-studio parts of the programme in-between. Out in the cold and rain there wasn't much to do while Keith and his guests stood around setting up the next segment. In fact, I don't actually recall what other celebrities were there, if any. All I remember is that Cheggers was there, jumping around with a hat on and laughing a lot. My diary entry is no more enlightening.

Saturday 2 October 1982

"Went down Lings to see Keith Chegwin on the Saturday Superstore (new programme)."

Hayden had been getting into the music of The Beatles the same time as me so we both were experiencing the joys of discovering their abundant back catalogue together. During 1982 EMI had started to re-release all the band's singles exactly twenty years after the original release. There was a huge ad campaign bearing the strap line *'It Was 20 Years Ago Today'* and the first re-released single, *'Love Me Do'*, managed to get to number four in the charts, a higher position than when it came out originally in 1962.

Tuesday 5 October 1982

"20 years since Beatles released 'Love Me Do'."

For a few months The Beatles were all over the television. Promotional films were broadcast on *'Top of the Pops'* and even *'Saturday Superstore'* played some 60s footage of the band during their second show. Old associates of the band were being interviewed on shows like TV-AM's *'Good Morning Britain'* and *'Pebble Mill at One'*. Numerous tribute magazines popped up in all the newsagents too, of which I purchased a few. We both started buying Beatles singles and, on Saturday 9 October, we went over to Weston Favell Shopping Centre and I made my first purchase – the seven inch single of *'All You Need Is Love'*/*'Baby You're A Rich Man'* (rel. 7 July 1967). Hayden bought *'She Loves You'*/*'I'll Get You'* (from 23 August 1963) at the same time for the sum of £1.35 each. This was my first proper record and I was buying it because I was falling in love with the band and wanted to, eventually, own the whole of their back catalogue and was starting to feel a bit more grown up having done so. This record was something I was going to look after and keep. We went back to Hayden's house where nobody else was in. Hayden hadn't brought a key out with him and we were locked out. We walked round the back and climbed over the garden fence but we still couldn't gain access. We really wanted to play our records! I had heard the A-side of my single on the radio before now but didn't have a clue what the B-side sounded like. I'd never heard of the song before. I wanted to hear how it went. It felt like we were waiting hours. During the wait and as boredom took hold of us I chased Hayden's rabbit, Snowy, around the garden for something to do. I only wanted to stroke him. I ended up cornering Snowy and he kicked his back legs and sprayed some foul-smelling liquid over my hand. I didn't know what it was. Was it rabbit wee? As we were still locked out I couldn't clean it off. It smelt horrible. Anyway, Auntie Sue came back eventually, let us in and I ran upstairs to have a wash and we claimed the front room, where the record player was, to play our new singles. I loved mine. Even the weird, not played on the radio often if at all, B-side, which I had never ever heard before. Two weeks later, on Saturday 23 October, I bought my second single, *'Hello, Goodbye'*/*'I Am the Walrus'* (rel. 24 November 1967) for £1 and a lifelong love for the music of The Beatles had begun. I loved the very strange B-side of this single and remember listening to it with headphones on in the living room at Lutterworth Road so many times on repeat that, by the time I had finished, my ears were bright red and burning hot. *'I Am the Walrus'* was weird as hell and I was starting to realise that I liked weird things – and every time I listened to the song I heard something that I hadn't heard before, there's so many layers to it. *'I Am the Walrus'* became my favourite song of all time and that's still the case to this day. In 1982 the song sounded like, to me, that it had been beamed in from the planet Mars so God knows what it sounded like fifteen years earlier when it was first released for public consumption back in 1967.

If Mum and Dad wanted to go out for the evening and get some time away from we three children it was usually Nana Jones who was called up for babysitting duties. Other Aunties, Uncles, older cousins and our previous next-door neighbour from Allen Road, Julie, took on the role occasionally but, eight times out of ten it was Nana Jones. Dad would pop up to hers in the car while Mum was putting on her glad rags on and drive Nana down to ours in time for them both to go out. The evening would begin with us being told sternly by Mum or Dad to, "Behave for Nana" before they left for the evening. Of course, this talking to had the complete opposite effect on us and after a honeymoon period of around ninety minutes we would get a bit bored and start the 'let's see how much we can get away with' routine of winding each other up and, in turn, Nana. It would normally start with one us annoying one of the other two until we were chasing each other round the house, screaming and shouting, throwing cushions, hitting one another when Nana wasn't looking then feigning innocence once she had confronted us. This was usually the result of me having hit Leanne or Nicola a bit too hard thus making them cry. A stern telling off would follow from Nana with threats of "Just you wait till your Mum and Dad get home. I'll tell them what's been going on." Any further sniggering from us would then result in the dreaded 'Nana slap'. This would involve Nana putting her hand really close to an exposed part of our body, usually a cheek or arm. Her hand would be held about one centimetre away from the chosen area then her hand would shake ever so minutely but fast and the gentlest of slaps would then be administered. As this was supposed to be the most severe of punishments it would only make us laugh even more. The only thing left for Nana to do was say to us "You'll be laughing on the other side of your faces", to which we promptly moved our mouths round to the side of our faces and mimed a

guffawing laugh. Nana knew there was nowhere further this could go so she'd go and sit down, defeated, and we'd chalk up a one-nil to us!

At Cliftonville English was my second favourite lesson after Art and Mr Smith was my English teacher. I was able to get my creative juices flowing by writing mainly horrific and hugely inappropriate stories that, if written nowadays, would probably end up with a phone call to social services. Mr Smith was a great teacher; he had a good sense of humour and we knew where the boundaries lie with him so we could have a laugh with him but knew not to go too far. He was also the deputy head of the school. Appearance-wise he looked a bit like television broadcaster Clive James and was just as jolly. My Mum regularly bumped into Mr Smith over the years and he always stopped to chat to her and ask her how we all were, Sadly, he passed away a few years ago. One story I had written during one of his lessons at the end of 1982 called *'The Three Explorers'* concluded thusly:

"He woke up pinned to the ground in a campsite; a cannibal campsite. The cannibals tortured Mark by sticking red hot poker in his eyes, cutting off his ears, making slits in his legs etc. They then stick him onto a pole and put the pole on some logs, twigs and leaves.

He is then burnt alive. He's screaming "No, no please, leave me, put out the flames, no please, no, arrrrghhh." He's dead. He's on the pole for about fifteen minutes. The cannibals put the flames out and have a feast of eyes, head, fingers, arms, legs, tongue and brain. Heee heee haaa haaa" say the monkeys in the trees, "Squawk, squawk" say the birds and "Boom, boom, boom" go the drums of Mulabaloo Island."

It was handed back to me after marking with a written remark from Mr Smith in red pen stating:

"Almost too blood thirsty to be readable Mark. You really must curb the will to add violence of such nature to most of your written work. 16/20"

I didn't understand what he was fussing about and, most importantly, he'd still given me a good mark. I think, secretly, he liked it despite the gore content!

With some of my scant weekly pocket money I joined the *'I-Spy Club'*. *'I-Spy'* books were published under a variety of subjects like *'I-Spy at the Seaside'*, *'I-Spy in the Hedgerow'*, *'I-Spy Archaeology'* and *'I-Spy Wildlife'*. These books were most popular in the fifties and sixties but were still easily found in book shops and garages in the eighties. As children spied the objects listed, they recorded where and when they saw them in the book and gained points, the more unusual the sight the higher the score gained. Once each book had been completed it could then be posted off to Big Chief I-SPY for a feather and order of merit. Those who participated in the games were known as the *'I-SPY Tribe'*, and by 1953 the said tribe had half a million members. Once you had joined, membership cost 50p, you received through the post an *'I-Spy Starter Book'*, a *'Top Secret Membership and Code Book'* and a certificate from Big Chief I-Spy himself, of which, mine is dated the 4 October 1982. My membership number was 310818! I was now entitled to use the title *'The Honourable Rank of New Redskin'*. Hooray! I never completed any of the books though so thus never gained any feathers. They kept me quiet though on the long car rides to various holiday destinations and gave me something to do whilst there instead of winding up my sisters.

For Christmas 1982 my most wanted present was any of The Beatles' albums that was missing from Dad's record collection. I asked for *'Abbey Road'* from 1969. Upon opening my gifts on Christmas morning I was annoyed to see that it had been bought for me on cassette. I should have specified to Mum that I wanted the record. She thought she was being clever by buying it on tape so that I could immediately listen to it on my personal stereo. Had I been given the record I could have recorded it onto a blank tape and had both a tape of it and the record! Anyway, I was sat listening to it in my bedroom and I got to the end of side one and heard all this hissing noise over the end of the song and the end of the track just cut off suddenly. There was no fade out or a proper end to the track. I thought "That can't be right, it sounds awful and songs don't just end like that!" So as soon as the shops were open I took it back to where Mum had got it from, Our Price in Peacock Place. Uncle Andrew was working there so I explained about the awful noise and the last track on side one cutting off abruptly and he agreed it was probably faulty. There was no issue with getting it exchanged. I chose instead *'Abbey Road'* on vinyl. Upon getting it home and putting it on the record player at home I found then realised that's exactly how *'I Want You (She's So Heavy)'* is supposed to sound. The tape wasn't faulty at all. I was sort of glad I had made that mistake though as I now had the album on tape and record and not just on tape. I did I feel a bit ridiculous though for thinking it there was something wrong with it and necessitating a trip into town to get it changed!

THOSE WE LOST IN 1982:

John Belushi – 5 March.

Arthur Lowe – 15 April.

Arthur Askey – 16 November.

Chapter 5: 1983

“I had touched the keys of a harmonium that John Lennon's fingers had actually played.”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'Videodrome' – David Cronenberg, 3 February.
- 'The Outsiders' – Francis Ford Coppola, 25 March.
- 'Return of the Jedi' – Richard Marquand, 25 May.
- 'WarGames' – John Badham, 3 June.
- 'Trading Places' – John Landis, 8 June.
- 'Monty Python's the Meaning of Life' – Terry Jones, 23 June.
- 'Superman III' – Richard Lester, 19 July.
- 'Jaws 3-D' – Joe Alves, 22 July.
- 'Risky Business' – Paul Brickman, 5 August.
- 'Christine' – John Carpenter, 9 December.
- 'Krull' – Peter Yates, 27 December.

An unauthorised documentary film called '*The Compleat Beatles*' had been released in 1982 on rental only video cassette. Seeing any moving footage of The Beatles was still a rare occurrence at the time. The local video shop, at which Dad was a member, had a copy on its shelves but only on the Betamax format and our video recorder at home was a VHS, as was most peoples, it being the dominant format. The manager didn't have any plans to get it in on VHS as videos back then were really expensive and one rental only video cassette could cost up to a hundred pounds. I was desperate to watch it. Luckily, Dad had a word with the owner and was told that if he bought a blank VHS and we popped back in tomorrow he would transfer a copy of the film from the Betamax original on to the new tape and we could watch it that way. Not completely kosher but who were we to argue? In the long run this was even better. This meant I could actually keep the film and watch it over and over again. After a few days we got the copy and this I did, much to the annoyance of my Dad who got sick of seeing and hearing it repeatedly on the television. I can still recite the introduction to the film, which was narrated by actor Malcolm McDowell, word for word over thirty years later.

At the time it was also really hard to be able to hear any Beatles songs that you didn't physically own on record or tape. I discovered that Radio Luxembourg broadcast a Beatles Hour every Tuesday at 6:45pm so would try my best to tune in when it was on. Thing was, trying to get a clear signal for the station was really hard back then. You had to put up with static, the faint sounds of other stations and a constant whining noise if you wanted to listen to it. I couldn't miss the show though in case they played a song I'd not heard before as, at this point, I still didn't have everything they'd ever released. Anyone could phone up the station and request songs and I had just discovered their really odd B-side '*You Know My Name, Look Up the Number*' (recorded in 1967 but finished off in 1969) which actually made me laugh out loud the first time I heard it. My Dad had recently purchased the 'Rarities' album that had been released on the 12 October 1979 and the song, which was previously only available as the B-side of the '*Let It Be*' single, was featured on it. On the evening of the Tuesday 11 January 1983, I rang up Radio Luxembourg and requested it and found myself live on international radio at age twelve! I had a tape recorder and blank tape ready so recorded my debut on the airwaves and that tape still exists today. The recording serves as the earliest example of how my voice sounded as a child. Compared to how it sounds now you'd think the tape was running a bit too fast as my voice wouldn't break for at least another year or so. Our next-door neighbour, Chris Beezhold, gets a mention from me because she was in the house babysitting us at the time. I would have felt bad leaving her out seeing as she was sat there right next to me:

“Errr, hello. This is Mark Jones in Northampton and I'd like to dedicate 'You Know My Name (Look Up the Number)' to my Mum, cos it's her birthday, and to Dad, Leanne and Nicola and Chris our neighbour.”

For some reason, at the end of an aimless walk round Northampton town centre one afternoon I bought a seven-inch single - Kenny Everett's Sid Snot single '*Snot Rap*' from the sale box at Spinadisc Records. At this point in time the shop was still at its original location which was a tiny thin premise on Abington Square. I don't really count the record as a bona fide purchase as I wasn't buying it because I liked the song but because I liked Kenny Everett and didn't want to go home empty handed. So, I spent the money that was

burning a hole in my pocket on that. It was only fifty pence. The record didn't get played much once the novelty of the admittedly awful song had worn off. It soon ended up getting melted by me armed with a lighter in the garden one boring summer's day. Spinadisc, owned by a man called Dick Raybould, soon moved from that location, where it had been since 1967, a bit further into town on Abington Street where the floor space was over ten times as large as the previous place and quickly became one of the go-to places on any music fan's trip into town. I would later spend five amazing and happy years working there during the mid-1990s with Dick as my boss.

One unfortunate memory I have from my time at Cliftonville is being struck on the arse with a bat by a teacher during a cricket match. It was a warm summer's day and I was too busy looking at the clouds and daydreaming as the cricket ball landed beside me and a chance to catch the batter out was lost. I was called over, bent over and whacked, hard, on the behind. I only had white gym shorts on and an apparel of underwear and it stung like hell and I spent the next ten minutes trying to disguise my grimace, withhold the will to scream and hold back the tears that were trying to force their way out until the pain wore off. It felt like I'd just sat on a hot electric oven hob! If that was to happen nowadays the teacher would soon, no doubt, be up in court on a charge of physical assault. I probably deserved it though and do not blame or hold any animosity towards the teacher who wielded said cricket bat. It's what was done back then to keep school children in check and it didn't do me any long-lasting harm. I certainly never daydreamed during cricket again!

In April of 1983 I took part in a third school production which was a play by Alan Ayckbourn called 'Ernie's Incredible Illucinations'. In it I played the minor role of the 'Attendant'. The play was produced by my English teacher, Mr Tarry, who was also my current form tutor. As well as being able to try out my acting skills again school plays were great for getting out of real lessons too. The only two performances of the play occurred on the evenings of Wednesday 27 and Thursday 28 April. I recall not wanting to go on one of the evenings as I had just borrowed Julie White's (the daughter of Ruth and George who were our neighbours when we lived at Allen Road) copy of The Beatles' 'Let It Be' album. I had never heard it before and just wanted to stay at home and listen to it over and over again on the family stereo via Dad's headphones. Despite my want to listen to The Beatles all night long I couldn't seriously let everyone down by not turning up. The Beatles would have to wait! All I can recall about the play now was that my big moment required me to climb a high step ladder in order to change a light bulb that had blown in the library. Meanwhile, Ernie was having one of his 'illucinations' and he was seeing me as a climber reaching the peak of a mountain. He then saw me fall off the mountain and I broke my leg which required mountain rescue to come and get me. In reality the 'Attendant' was just falling off the ladder in the library. As my moment approached I had to ensure I had a tight grip on the top rung and then pretend to fall from the ladder. My feet slipped off the rung I was standing on, my legs flailed about and the clatter of a rickety ladder rang out from the stage and, on both nights, I received an audible 'gasp' from the audience. I felt really pleased that my acting must have been so good that the audience thought that me falling off the ladder wasn't supposed to have happened and was a complete accident. My work was done and my mark on the play had been made. A version of the play by the BBC is available to watch online. Here, you can see the scene I was in (<https://youtu.be/plhpaWk2iJM?t=975>). That would have been me walking in while carrying the ladder then turning into a mountaineer.

In the summer I left Cliftonville Middle School and prepared to move on to my final compulsory place of education. I had been given a choice of going to Trinity Upper School or The Northampton School for Boys (known here after as NSB). The latter was literally a 10-minute walk from my house so my choice was more or less made for me. I was to start at NSB in September of 1983. Walking to and from school would take me a total of ten minutes which meant I could get up later in the morning and arrive home earlier afterwards. Bonus - more free time!

During the school summer holiday, on Tuesday 26 July 1983, the Jones family went on a day trip to England's capital city London. Hayden came with us and we did some of the usual touristy things - Buckingham Palace and Tower Bridge etc. I was aware, through my monthly purchases of the 'Beatles Monthly' magazine, that for the first time ever Abbey Road recording studios had opened their doors to the public and were showing an exclusive film they had prepared about the history of the studio and the years that The Beatles used it to record the majority of their songs. The show ran from 18 July to 11 September and a ticket cost a mere £4.50. The flyer for the event read:

"Come and experience the magic of Number 2 Studio where The Beatles recorded from 1962-69. This is a unique opportunity for a limited period to see an exciting and unusual video with original sound recordings of
The Beatles at Abbey Road.

Recording Equipment will be on display, books and souvenirs on sale, and refreshments provided."

This event was the first time that EMI allowed some of its many hours of Beatles recording session tapes to be heard in public. Reviews of the show had mentioned how fantastic it was hearing unreleased Beatles songs and recordings of them at work in the studio being played in the actual room they had been recorded in. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be follow in the footsteps of The Beatles, walking up the same steps and along the same corridors as they had all those years ago. I already had a few bootleg tapes of unreleased music by the band that I had purchased at record fairs held in College Street in Northampton so my interest in this forthcoming presentation was piqued. I couldn't afford to buy a real bootleg records, they cost anything between ten and fifteen pounds and there was no way I could afford that so I made do with tapes that the vendors would record of each illicit album. A C60 tape would cost £2.50 and a C90 £3.50. The first bootleg tape I bought was called '*Strawberry Fields Forever*' and released by a bootleg label called NEMS. It caught my eye because, as I scanned the track listing, I saw that it contained some titles I'd never heard of before – '*A Perfect Rendition*', '*The Bus*', '*Barber of Seville*' and '*Peace of Mind*'. What on earth were these? I asked the seller if I could have a quick listen to the tape before I parted with my cash. My jaw dropped when I heard the first track – I was hearing an acetate version of one of my favourite songs which was also the title of the bootleg. I was so excited when I realised it was the complete version of the first half of the released song, albeit sourced from a scratchy acetate. It's a well-known fact that '*Strawberry Fields Forever*' is made up of two separate recordings using two completely different arrangements. With the magic of studio trickery they were joined together by George Martin to make the finished track. It also came in a red tape box which I thought was fitting as Strawberries are red!

Having had my appetite whetted for the illicit fair that some bootlegs offered I was desperate to hear these hitherto unheard recordings that were being played at Abbey Road. I thought that being able to would be an unreachable dream. We were so very lucky that the day we were in London tickets for the event hadn't sold out. After standing in a queue outside Abbey Road studios Dad managed to get three tickets for me, him and Hayden while Mum and my sisters, who weren't the slightest bit interested in sitting in a darkened studio for two hours, went to London Zoo to occupy themselves. Whilst in Abbey Road I was in heaven, I was occupying space that the members of The Beatles had occupied and, for the first time ever, I knew that for the fact. Upon arrival back home I immediately typed out a report on the day's events, which had proved to be one of the most amazing days of my life so far. I reproduce my recollections exactly as I wrote them back in 1983:

"OUR VISIT TO THE ABBEY ROAD SIGHT AND SOUND EXHIBITION."

On July 26th 1983, Mum, Dad, Leanne, Nicola, Hayden and I went to London for the day and Dad, Hayden and I decided to try and get tickets for the exhibition in the Abbey Road recording studios. So, at 2 o'clock we managed (by pushing in the line) to get 3 tickets for the 7:30 performance.

7:30 arrived and we arrived at the legendary studios in Abbey Road. Our bags were searched for tape recorders (they didn't want any bootlegs) and we entered studio number 2. Hayden and I bought 3 "Beatle Now" mags and sat down. A man gave a speech and the lights went down.

The video started with some early history of the studios. It showed the very first piece of music being recorded there which was "Pomp and Circumstance". We were then shown a 1961 piece of film of Helen Shapiro recording a song. Then we saw The Beatles. Norman Smith was interviewed for the video, which was shown in pieces throughout it.

Here's some of the features of this superb video; We were given some studio outtakes of Beatles songs to listen to, for instance, we heard The Beatles playing "I Saw Her Standing There", they were halfway through the tune when Paul said "Too fast, It's too fast". They sang it again, stopped near the beginning and then sang the released version. We heard brilliant Beatles renditions of "How Do You Do It" and "Leave My Kitten Alone". These were ACE! We also heard a 1963 version of "One After 909". Which was better than the "Let It Be" version. We saw The Beatles singing "Ticket to Ride" with John and Paul seated in armchairs, George seated on the floor and Ringo standing up. During the song John misses out a "Yeah" and puts it in about 4 seconds later. We also saw the "Paperback Writer" and "Rain" videos. We see John drinking some wine, he sees he's being filmed, puts down the glass and picks up a cup of tea and gives us a grin. We heard "She's a Woman" as it sounded in the first couple of takes. Also "Help!" without the vocals. We heard 2 versions of "Strawberry fields forever", a slow version with soft "ahhhhs" added, and the second half of the released version played at its recorded speed which is much faster than the released one.

We heard an early version of "Hey Jude" which was slower and it had piano pieces in and out of the "Na na na" bit.

We saw the rare version of the video of "Hello Goodbye" which had John doing some very funny dancing. Also, the rare videos of "S.F.F.", "Penny Lane" and "Day in the Life". We heard "Lady Madonna" being sung with laughter, shouting and talking in it. Also, we listened to the first version of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" with just an accustic accompianit. It finished with a goodbye message from Ringo then a picture of John came on and we heard "No 9 Dream".

"This is Ringo here, the other 3 have said everything except thank you and goodbye".

Written by Mark Jones.

I took some photos of the street sign, Hayden and I outside the studio and crossing the crossing (my Dad took the last 2), the Ludwig drum kit, the studio itself and some instruments."

As you can see, I couldn't spell "acoustic accompaniment"! I still can't spell that last word, I had to look it up to write it here! That last part of our trip to London had been really amazing. I couldn't believe that I had touched the keys of a harmonium that John Lennon's fingers had actually played while recording the song 'We Can Work It Out' and had been in the very room all of my favourite Beatles' songs had been recorded in. It had still only been less than three years since John had been murdered. I, along with many people in the studio that day, fought hard to stop ourselves from crying while the video played out to the end accompanied by John's solo song 'No.9 Dream' from 1973.

Four days later and back at home Dad wrote a poem about my Beatles obsession and mentioned our trip to Abbey Road:

*"Mark, he is my only lad,
Hasn't got good taste like his Dad.
Likes The Beatles, not the Stones,
With taste like that shouldn't call himself Jones.*

*He's got their records and their tapes,
If a Beatle was sick he'd send them grapes.
Last 'Beatles Monthly' he was shown,
Then dragged me off to Abbey Road.*

*Talked me round by being shifty,
Made me fork out £13.50.
For him and Hayden and also me,
To get in studios, what a fee!*

*Every day while sitting peaceful,
Out of the window comes sound of Beatle.
'She's a Woman' and 'Hard Day's Night',
'Yesterday, 'The Inner Light'.*

*If you sing and you're word out,
Out of the window he will shout!
"Get it right, or don't sing at all!"
He really drives you up the wall!*

*Goes up Weston, heavy laden,
Gone to see his cousin Hayden.
Shouts at Paul "Wotcha Haystack!"
Gets a belt across the back.*

*Soon he'll go to School for Boys,
There he won't make so much noise.
Perhaps by then when on those headphones,
He'll start to like those genius STONES!*

Composed by R. V. Jones 30.7.83"

It was at the end of the school's summer holiday of 1983 that I experienced going abroad to a foreign country for the second time. The first had been a school day trip to France at Cliftonville while in the fourth year earlier on in '83. My next-door neighbour, Bob Beezhold, was a long-distance lorry driver for a company called E. M. Rogers, a haulage firm based in Northampton. Mum had probably suggested I go due to me getting 'well bored' by the end of the six weeks off. So, I accompanied him on one of his regular trips to Italy. Previous long-distance trips out in the car had always resulted in me being violently travel sick and I had a real fear of throwing up so I took a plentiful supply of little purple travel sickness tablets to lessen the chance of my previous meal being sprayed down the side of the lorry.

We left on the night of Sunday 28 August. Rather than leave on the Monday morning Bob liked to get a head start by leaving the night before then setting up for a kip when tiredness overtook him I recall the moment I realised I was actually in France and saw The Eiffel Tower for the first time in Paris from a distance. We couldn't stop though as this was work for Bob and he didn't have time to do touristy things so I had to make do with seeing it go past from the lorry window. Bob had a double bunk behind the seats in his cab so that's where we slept and it was quite comfortable for what little room we had. We stopped at Verona in Italy first, where we met up with some of Bob's lorry driver mates and I had my first taste of Italian food. I was used to eating things like fish fingers and mash and lamb chops and chips back home and I absolutely hated what was put in front of me. I didn't like tomatoes anyway and it seemed everything in Italy had tomatoes in it. It made me gag.

Worse was to come. Should you have needed to do a 'number two' the public toilets in Italy back then didn't have anything you could sit on and do your business. You had to stand over something that looked like an antiseptic foot wash that you'd see in swimming pools. You'd put your feet on either side and do what you needed to into a hole in the floor. I wasn't having that. I thought it was revolting. I spent the whole week away without doing a 'number two'. Luckily, I wasn't eating much due to my distaste of the cuisine so the need to go was lessened. I enjoyed the weather though. It was hot all the time, it had never been this hot in England and I remember stopping off in what looked like an old builders' yard and seeing, for the first time ever, lizards crawling along the walls. Night-time brought with it the sounds of crickets buzzing, something I'd only ever heard in films before, and it was great hearing it for real for the first time.

At the end of the week, when we were due to head back, staff had gone on strike at the ferry terminals so we couldn't get back to England straight way. No one knew how long this would go on for so we went to Lake Garda in Italy and spent a couple of days there having a bit of a real holiday instead of queuing up in a line of traffic that wasn't going to go anywhere fast. As it was, I missed my first two days at my new school which I didn't feel any need to moan about. While the other boys in my year had been experiencing their first day at NSB I'd been out in the sun and swimming in a beautiful, warm lake in the Italian sun. Who in their right mind would complain? Not me!

NORTHAMPTON SCHOOL FOR BOYS

Headmaster – Mr Holmes.

Year 3 – Mr O'Leary (September, 1983 – July, 1984).

Year 4 – Mr Lee (September, 1984 – July, 1985).

Year 5 – Mr Ford (September, 1985 – March, 1986).

Once we'd arrived back from Italy I started at my new school two days later than everyone else. My new form tutor was called Mr O'Leary and I found myself at bit of a disadvantage due to this. There was only one seat left in the classroom so I had to sit there and sat next to me, was a boy called Paul McKay who I'd never met before. Paul filled me in on what our new form teacher was like and offered to show me round the new school once we had a break. Luckily, Paul was okay and we became good friends and our friendship lasted way after we'd both left the school. I soon made other new friends at the school and remained mates with some of the boys who'd moved schools with me. A few, like Darren Masters, Stephen Hanwell and Neil Donaldson were friends of mine throughout my entire school career. I soon settled in and, eventually, found my place. I was never in the top or bottom groups at any of the schools I went to. I was more or less just above the middle, but only halfway, which usually kept me in the group below the ones the really clever kids were in. Being in a 'B' group for a lesson in the main I mostly found myself in the top third of the class. Unless it was Geography. I hated Geography. I had been in group 'B' for Geography but did so well I was moved to group 'A' where I promptly didn't understand anything I was being taught any more so fell far behind. So behind in fact that I ended up not caring any more about anything to do with bloody Geography ever again!

I soon gained my first paying job, a paper round at Sydney Childs Newsagents situated at the top of my street. Sydney, the owner, could be a right grump and I was a bit scared of him but I managed to post the right newspapers through the right letterboxes 95% of the time, probably only because I was petrified of

him having a go at me if I didn't. For the inconvenience of having to get up early every morning bar Sunday and go out on my red Raleigh 'Chopper' bike I was awarded a weekly wage of £3.50 every Saturday once that final days delivery was out of the way.

During my time at NSB I'd been hearing lots of my mates talking about their new favourite possessions, various different makes of home computers. We had all grown out of our toys now. Our 'Action Man', board games, annuals and chemistry sets had been consigned to cupboards, jumble sales or, worse, thrown out with the rubbish. There was a variety of computers being mentioned but one kept coming up, the Sinclair ZX Spectrum. I wanted to find out more about this small black electronic thing with a squishy keyboard that you could load in games from cassette tape which you could then play. Tapes had only been previously used for listening to music on (with added 'hiss') or recording our own voices on in our own house and now there was another use for them. The wages I earned from my paper round barely covered enough for a magazine and some sweets a week so I had no chance of saving up and getting a computer for myself. (Bear in mind, before I had a job, me and my sister's pocket money had gone up from ten pence a week in the late seventies to a princely one pound). Some of my mates had also mentioned other machines that they owned too: BBC B's, Dragon 32's, Vic 20's and something called a Commodore 64 were among the computers being talked about. I decided this was something I needed to look into a bit more.

As this was the very last Christmas that I received an annual (or two when I was a very lucky boy!) here follows a list of all the annuals I received from 1975 to 1983.

- 1975 – **'Rupert – The Daily Express Album'** – Beaverbrook Newspapers Ltd. – 80p and
'The Dandy Book 1976' – D. C. Thomson & Co. Ltd. – 70p
- 1976 – **'Dr Who Annual 1977'** – BBC World Distributors (Manchester) Ltd. – £1.25
- 1977 – **'Krazy Annual 1978'** – IPC Magazines Ltd. – £1
- 1978 – **'Krazy Annual 1979'** – IPC Magazines Ltd. – £1.10
- 1979 – **'Jackpot Annual 1980'** – IPC Magazines Ltd. – £1.25
- 1980 – **'Jackpot Annual 1981'** – IPC Magazines Ltd. – £1.50 and
'Whizzer and Chips Annual 1981' – IPC Magazines Ltd. – £1.50
- 1981 – **'Jackpot Annual 1982'** – IPC Magazines Ltd. – £1.95 and
'Buster Book 1982' – IPC Magazines Ltd. – Price unknown
- 1982 – **'Krazy Annual 1983'** – IPC Magazines Ltd. – £2.25
- 1983 – **'Whizzer and Chips Annual 1984'** – IPC Magazines Ltd. – £2.50

By the next Christmas I was, by now, into my second year of being a teenager and had discovered something very new and exciting that took my attention away from those silly, childish comics.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1983:

- Dick Emery** – 2 January.
- Billy Fury** – 28 January.
- Karen Carpenter** – 4 February.
- Muddy Waters** – 30 April.
- David Niven** – 29 July.
- John Le Mesurier** – 15 November.
- Violet Carson** – 26 December.

Chapter 6: 1984

“Got a ZX Spectrum 48k... too excited to write anything!?”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

'This is Spinal Tap' – Rob Reiner, 2 March.

'The Children of the Corn' – Fritz Kiersch, 9 March.

'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom' – Steven Spielberg, 23 May.

'Ghostbusters' – Ivan Reitman, 7 June.

'Gremlins' – Joe Dante, 8 June.

'The Terminator' – James Cameron, 26 October.

'A Nightmare on Elm Street' – Wes Craven, 9 November.

The year got off to a great start Beatle-wise when ITV broadcast Granada TV's new documentary *'The Early Beatles 1962 to 1965'*, based on footage they had in the archives of the band. The documentary had been delayed a few months (due to 'technical reasons', whatever that meant) and I'd had a brand-new blank video ready to record the show for weeks already. On Sunday 1 January 1984 at 5:40pm I made everyone else in the house shush, sat down, pressed record on the VHS recorder and saved myself a copy of the show. I was in heaven for 45 minutes. The show had many clips that had never been broadcast since the 60s and I was seeing them for the very first time. There was *'Some Other Guy'* filmed at the Cavern, *'Twist and Shout'* from Scene at 6:30, *'I Want to Hold Your Hand'* and *'This Boy'* from the same show as well as a funny interview with Ken Dodd amongst the items shown. Once the show had finished, I removed the copy protection tab on my tab so that I didn't accidentally record over it and it sat alongside my copy of *'The Complete Beatles'* which now was given a bit of a rest when I wanted to watch The Beatles doing their thing on the TV. Incidentally, that copy of *'The Early Beatles 1962 to 1965'* that I recorded from the television that day was sent all the way over to Australia twenty six years later and professionally transferred to DVD, as it just so happened to be the best quality version available outside of the Granada TV archives. Someone I knew via a Beatles internet forum was putting together DVDs of lost TV performances that weren't available to buy in the shops and had offered to preserve my version of the show for posterity for myself and all the other people round the world who wanted a clean copy of the show.

Just over a week later, on 9 January, *'Nobody Told Me'*, a song John Lennon had recorded in 1980 but never had the chance to finish, was released as a single (peaking at number 6 in the charts) and Paul McCartney was in the top 10 with his *'Pipes of Peace'* record (spending 12 weeks in the charts and peaking at number 1). There was still lots going on for fans of The Beatles in 1984.

At the start of the year I gave up my paper round and, after a few weeks or not doing much and with pressure from the parents, started a new job that Mum found for me working after school at a shoe factory called Walliswear (which I called Wally Wear in my diary, as I thought the boss was a bit of a dope). The job involved having to put the hard insides into moccasins that helped the shoe to keep its shape. I would travel there on my Chopper after school, lock it up in the entrance to the factory and work for a few hours. I wasn't paid by the hour; it was piece work and I was to be paid on production of a tally that was an accurate record of how many moccasins I'd physically completed. It was dull as hell and the factory stunk of glue but I did earn a bit more than I did from my previous paper round.

With my money from the job I bought myself a book to read that everyone was talking about – *'The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole aged 13 ¾'* by Sue Townsend and published my Methuen. It had already been out a few years, having been originally published on 7 October 1982. The book was fast becoming a best seller and by November 1985 had sold 1.9 million copies. I have no recollection of what made me want to get my own copy at this particular time but it could have been that when I stumped up the £1.50 for it, on Friday 16 March, I was more or less the same age as the main character. Another reason may have been that publicity surrounding the forthcoming television adaptation had featured in the local newspaper and television as the boy the producers chose to play Adrian, Gian Sammarco, was from Northampton, obviously a call for local celebration. The show was eventually broadcast the following year, starting on 16 September, and was watched and enjoyed by me, Mum and my sisters. Adrian's Mum was portrayed by the well-known actress Julie Walters. We didn't miss an episode of *'Adrian Mole'* and would record each one on to VHS video so we could watch it again when we children were bored. Leanne loved it so much she even acquired the seven-inch single of the theme song from the show sung by Ian Dury called

'Profoundly in Love with Pandora'. I thoroughly enjoyed the book and read a few pages every night before I went to sleep until I had finished it and then promptly read it all over again. It was the first non-fiction book that I'd discovered myself – previous literary works I'd had to read as part of an English lesson at school. No one ordered me to read this one. I found lots of it funny and no doubt identified with certain things Adrian was having to deal with, with us both being the same age and sex. The whole experience influenced me enough that it resulted in me starting another diary again. For my 1984 diary entries my style of writing tries to ape Sue Townsend's prose but, in all honesty, fails miserably. Still, without having read *'Adrian Mole'* I wouldn't have started the all but brief diary – the whole thing only amounted to around ten pages before I gave up again - that would record a couple of the most important dates in my life to date.

In my diary I note that on Tuesday 20 March I earned £1.72 from my Walliswear moccasin factory job. The next day, the grand total had amounted to £1.92 and on that Friday, which was pay day, my total for the week was a whopping great £4.20. One day I recorded that I went to work for just thirty minutes and earned a paltry 63p. Imagine having to physically go out and get to work to earn those amounts nowadays. It's a wonder I ever mustered up enough enthusiasm to go. I obviously thought it was worth it though as I had the added incentive of not having to get up early as I had during the paper round and, at the end of the day, was earning a few more pennies than I did previously. Back in '84 every coin counted. I only stuck it out at Walliswear out for a few months. I really didn't enjoy the job, being stuck in an empty factory with a man twice my age who I didn't particularly get on well with, and left with no other job to go to so soon went back to being penniless again, albeit temporarily.

On Monday 24 March 1984, a new comic appeared on the newsagent's shelves called *'Scream'* retailing at 22p. The first edition came with the obligatory free gift which, in this case, was a pair of plastic *'Dracula fangs'*. Published by IPC Magazines from King's Reach Tower in Stamford Street, London it featured all sorts of spooky stories designed 'not for the nervous'. The strips included *'The Dracula File'*, *'Monster'*, *'The Thirteenth Floor'*, *'Tales from the Grave'*, *'Library of Death'* and *'The Terror of the Cats'*. These were serious comic strips compared to the comics I'd bought previously. *'Fiends and Neighbours'* was another but was a more light-hearted strip that looked like something you could have found in *Monster Fun* or *Buster* a few years earlier. Issue two followed the next week and came with another free gift taped to the front cover of a *'spooky spider'*. Me and Hayden both ended up buying *'Scream'* every week and thought it was great and appealed to our fascination for the macabre. That was until it just disappeared from the shelves after the fifteenth issue which was published on the 30 June, just over three months after its debut and that was the last we ever saw of *'Scream'*. Four holiday specials came out later on (produced between 1985 and 1988) but I didn't buy any of those. Hayden was more on the ball and managed to purchase a few that I thumbed through on my visits to his. We had no idea what had happened to the comic and it was only years later that I discovered it had ceased publication, along with five other IPC titles, due to 'an industrial dispute'.

I was still thinking about which computer I actually wanted for myself should I ever be able to find a way to get one. I must have been doing some subconscious homework as it was during this period that I went round school mate Lee Plowman's house to see his Dragon 32. His computer had been released in August of 1982 by a company called Dragon Data Ltd. and had been enjoying only moderate success. I had known Lee since 1979 when we both started at Cliftonville Middle School and he had also chosen to go to Northampton School for Boys when we both left Cliftonville in the middle of 1983. Lee had participated in the school holiday to Wales at Cliftonville that I also went on and a school trip over on the ferry to France which was the first time I had ever set foot off English soil. Lee loaded up a few games for me to look at. I evidently didn't think much of whatever titles Lee showed me that evening as I cannot recall any of them. I think that says enough about how unimpressed I was!

On the morning of Saturday 31 March 1984, with my interest piqued and wanting to find out more about this ZX Spectrum I'd been hearing all about, my Mum gave me a lift to a part of town I'd never been to before. It was situated in one of the newer suburbs of Northampton that didn't consist of normal terraced houses in streets like the ones I'd grown up in. I was visiting Neil Anderson's house in Hawksmoor Way, Duston, so I could see his ZX Spectrum in action. Neil was a friend from NSB and had owned one for a few months by this time and was going to let me sample its delights. I was finally going to be allowed to use a real ZX Spectrum for the first time and play some actual games. Upon arrival I found that Neil's house was rather alien to me. The lay out was completely different to any other house I'd been in before and had stairs that were set in the middle of his living room. Both of the terraced houses I'd lived in had stairs in the hallway that took you to the first floor. I'd never seen anything like it. Once I'd been introduced to his Mum who was probably just checking I wasn't some sort of nutcase Neil took me upstairs and showed me to his bedroom. He had his Spectrum set up on his bed in front of a huge television set just like the one we had in our living room at home. I was immediately jealous that he had a colour television all to himself and didn't have to share one with the rest of his family. He could play on his Spectrum whenever he wanted! As I

hadn't got a clue what game to sample first I let Neil make the game choices and, once he'd had a bit of a think, he typed in 'LOAD ""' and 'ENTER' then pressed play on the tape player that was set up next to the keyboard. The border on the television started to display coloured lines that danced in correspondence to the noise that was coming out of the Spectrum itself. It was unlike anything I had heard before - horrible sounding screeches and squawks that hurt my ears. I had to ask him what on earth the computer was doing. "We have to load the game in from the tape. Those lines in the border and that noise you're hearing is the data that makes up the game", he explained. I got a bit bored waiting for the game to load. No one at school had actually mentioned anything to me about how long you physically had to wait before the game could actually be played. It felt like hours (even though it was nowhere near) and Neil didn't have much else, no books or posters on the walls, in his bedroom to look at while the games loaded either which made the wait feel even longer. That afternoon he loaded up various games for me to sample that included 'Atic Atac' and 'Jet Pac' by Ultimate, 'Pogo' by Ocean Software, 'Chequered Flag', 'Space Raiders' and 'Horace and the Spiders' by Sinclair Research Ltd, 'The Pyramid' by Fantasy Software, 'Night Gunner' by Digital Integration, 'Krakatoa' by Abbex, 'Manic Miner' by Bug-Byte/Software Projects, 'Wheeler' by Micromega and 'Spawn of Evil' by Dk'tronics. Neil amplified the sound coming out of the Spectrum through his cassette player using the ear and microphone leads so that the sounds being emitted from the tiny piezo buzzer contained within the Spectrum could at least be heard properly. I thought that the jumping noise in 'Jet Set Willy' sounded like twinkly water. "How is the Spectrum doing that?" I said to Neil. I was also well impressed with 'Atic Atac'. It looked like a proper arcade game but it was in Neil's bedroom, not in an arcade. We didn't have to put money into the machine to play it. Not only that but the graphical capabilities on the Spectrum impressed me very much. They were more detailed and less blocky than the other machines I had seen at school and at various mates' houses. I knew nothing about the two colours per eight by eight-character square limitation at the time which, in some games, would cause the dreaded 'colour clash' and would give me a few headaches a couple of years later. All I knew was that what I was seeing was pretty spiffy.

I didn't have many goes on any of the games myself that day. I let Neil play them as I didn't want to show myself up. I was bound to be rubbish, it being my first time, and didn't want to embarrass myself in front of him. It all looked so complicated. Here were these things on the television screen that we could control, we could make them move the way we wanted them to just by pressing certain keys on the keyboard. It was really weird to see that you could interact with these moving images after years of just watching moving pictures on the television. You couldn't really influence anything that you saw on the television before this unless you count choosing a page on the Ceefax or Oracle teletext service. You either watched something on it or you turned it off - there wasn't any interaction. Here we were controlling what was going on. After an hour or so my mind was officially blown. Of course, I had no idea whatsoever how these things worked or how these moving images were made to move and do what they were doing on the television screen. Time flew by as he loaded game after game and, after a while, I did have a few goes on some of them myself. Neil also explained to me that it wasn't really worth getting a 16k ZX Spectrum now, most of the games wouldn't work on it as the memory was too small and I if I did end up getting my own ZX Spectrum that I should go for the 48k model. Just before I left Neil showed me his pile of C60 tapes full of games and said he would gladly do me a copy of all of them if I did decide to get myself a ZX Spectrum. Mum came and picked me up a few hours later and as I sat in the car on the way home I wondered about the possibilities that would come my way should I actually get my own machine. Then Hayden went and got a ZX Spectrum 48k and on Sunday 8 April 1984 I went up to his to have a go on it. My diary states:

"they [Spectrums] are really great."

This was it now, I wanted one of my own. Hayden now had a machine which would make getting even more games easier. I'd be able to get the games that Neil got from our school friends at NSB and, as Hayden went to a different school, I would be able to tap into that resource for even more games. I was now almost certain that my own personal computer had to be a Sinclair ZX Spectrum with 48k of ram! The next day's diary entry read:

"Went on (again) at Mum and Dad about a computer."

The week after, on Tuesday 10 April 1984, I went over to Paul King's house, another mate from NSB who lived in Thursby Road in the Abington area of Northampton. His computer of choice was a Commodore Vic 20. I thought I'd just check out his machine before I definitely committed to choosing a Sinclair ZX Spectrum for myself. I recall Paul loading up 'Jet Pac' by Ultimate on his Vic 20 and I wasn't at all taken with the machine's fat squished up graphics. That, I think, made my mind up finally. I should add that none of my current mates had a Commodore 64, the machine that was the only real rival to the ZX Spectrum. I had

heard them being mentioned in passing but they all appeared to be owned by boys in the top sets at school. Boys I didn't really know or mix with much and who appeared to live in massive houses and had parents with names like Tabitha and Henry. I wasn't friends with any of that lot, I was usually in the set one below them at school, so the opportunity for me to have a go on a Commodore 64 never presented itself to me. I had one friend with a BBC B, Adam Stevens, and he was well posh, even posher than the Commodore 64 owning boys. I didn't even bother sampling a BBC B as we had a couple of them at school that lived in the Chemistry laboratory so I'd already had a few try outs. Not only were they physically much bigger machines compared to the Spectrum I didn't think much of the graphics. They too looked very blocky and squashed up to me.

On Wednesday 11 April 1984 school finished early - at 12:55 to be exact - due to a teacher's strike so I took the opportunity to meet Mum in town to look at computers and compatible cassette recorders. First, we went to the Northampton Home Computer Centre (and referred to as NHCC from now on) which was situated on the edge of Northampton town centre on Abington Street. NHCC was the only shop in the town set up solely to sell home computers, games and add-ons. We were going there to have a look at their range of stock and get a bit of advice from the staff. A further walk into town was undertaken so that Boots the Chemists and WHSmith, both of whom had sizeable computer departments, could be checked to see how their prices compared to everyone else. By the end of the trip I was now absolutely certain that Clive Sinclair's rubber keyboard ZX Spectrum was going to be my number one choice.

My 'going on at them' had evidently worked because the very next day I arrived home from school at around 3:45pm and I hadn't been back for more than two minutes when Mum, who was sat in the front room in the sofa chair in the bay window, motioned towards her right and the gap in-between the sofa and the chair she was sitting on. There, in a big carrier bag, was a brand new 48k Sinclair ZX Spectrum along with a tape recorder! As I jumped on the package and opened the top I could not actually believe it. There it was in front of me at last! My diary for the day reads:

“Thursday 12th April 1984:

*Got a ZX Spectrum 48k + new cassette recorder! Too excited to write anything!!
END OF DIARY!”*

That was it! No more entries. I had obviously deemed the diary not worthy of any effort anymore and, had I continued, would have used up precious Spectrum games playing time filling in the events of each day. In hindsight I should have kept up. How interesting would it have been to now be able to read about my first months of getting to know my new ZX Spectrum? Anyway, back to the day itself. I was so excited. I knew that a Spectrum wasn't exactly cheap, £175 to be exact, and you had to include the added cost of the tape recorder, pushing the whole outlay to nearer £200 and that's without any purchased games (£200 in today's (2020) money would be worth £647.70!) I did ask Mum recently if she remembers where she bought it from and how on earth she and Dad could afford it but she really can't remember. When I reminded her of the price she couldn't believe how they could have possibly found the money for it back then. The computer may have been an order from her trusty catalogue - buy now, pay off at a fiver a week for the next two years - but the fact that it was there in the house the very next day makes me think otherwise. The turnaround from nosing round town to actually holding my own ZX Spectrum in my hands was way too quick. Maybe the trip to town was a diversion tactic and she had already decided to get me one?

Anyway, who cares? I immediately set it up on the downstairs colour television as quickly as I could. We'd never had anything like this in the house before. I could do without watching 'Danger Mouse' and 'John Craven's Newsround' that night but I knew I wouldn't have long to play with my new acquisition because Dad would come home from work soon and would want the television. It was still sunny outside so I had to draw the living room curtains in order to see the screen properly. I had to cram as much time in as I could getting to know my new computer. As I didn't have any other games tapes the only thing I could load in was the 'Horizons' tape that came with the Spectrum. I must admit I was pretty unimpressed by what was on the tape - dull tutorials furnished with primitive graphics that were printed and plotted, slowly, onto the screen via BASIC commands. 'Thro' The Wall', the bat, ball and brick wall game, provided at least five minutes of entertainment. This didn't look like anything like the games I had seen demonstrated at Neil's house. I wanted some real games and I knew where to get them from, for free – school! I worked my way through 'Horizons' that one time and barely looked at it ever again.

I scoured my collection of C60's and C90 music tapes to see which ones could be sacrificed and took a handful into school the next day as I didn't have any money for new ones. I asked Neil if it was still okay for me to take him up on his offer of recording me some of his games. Neil stayed true to his word and, a few days later, had filled the tapes I had handed to him with copies of his complete games collection.

I spent the rest of the school day glancing at the titles when I could sneak a look without getting caught and wondered what on earth the games were going to be like once I'd loaded them into my Spectrum. Neil did warn me about one particular game though. He had copied a game called '*Jet Set Willy*' and in order to play it I needed to make a copy of a piece of paper he had brought in containing a grid and lots of numbers. "Do I have to?" I asked. "Yes, the game will 'New' itself if you don't type in the right number", said Neil. "Well, is the game any good?" "It's brilliant. One of the best games you'll ever play." He then reminded me that he had loaded it up for me when I had gone round to his. So, during break time, I sat down under the science block and wrote out all the numbers on Neil's paper which was a mind numbingly boring process but I didn't want to miss out on this '*Jet Set Willy*' game he'd been telling me all about. It was the first time I had heard of it. A few more friends, once I had told them of my exciting new acquisition, also offered to fill up a few tapes for me. A treasure trove of new experiences awaited me.

Having spent the time copying out the code sheet I made the point of loading '*Jet Set Willy*' first. Neil was right, it was great. You didn't even have to be good at it to see loads of different screens. You could just wander about without taking any notice of the actual object of the game which was to collect up all the flashing objects that could be found in the various rooms. I loved it so much that, because I'd loaded it up so many times, eventually I could recognize when it was almost finished loading just by listening to the sound of that came through the television speakers. This was the only the only game I could do this to. The bits and bytes loading in to the ZX Spectrum made their own unique pattern of squawks and screeches. The last part of '*Jet Set Willy*' sounds like the data's doing a little dance with lots of high pitched sequels interspersed with deeper sounds and, right at the end, a big wodge of lower pitched noises make an appearance for about three seconds then the game starts and the program asks for the entry code. Over the last few months and with my scant pocket money I had been buying a few computer games magazines so I could check out what they were like. While looking at the shelf at the newsagent I noticed there were quite a few to choose from. I had taken my time and checked them all out with a through flick through each one. The very first magazine I bought was the first issue of a publication called '*Big K*'. I had probably been persuaded to part with my money for that particular magazine as it had, affixed to its front cover, a free blank tape. The magazine itself was okay but I wasn't tempted to buy another copy of '*Big K*' again – it was a multi-format magazine and I only read the bits to do with the ZX Spectrum as I wasn't interested in reading about games that I myself wouldn't be able to play at home. '*Big K*' only lasted 12 issues and then folded. I guess it wasn't just me that hadn't been that impressed with its contents. I also purchased a few '*C&VG*'s which was, again, another multi-format magazine but this one took longer to read than '*Big K*'. A few issues of '*Sinclair User*'s and '*Your Spectrum*'s were also bought to test out the water and see what they were like. I preferred these publications to '*Big K*' and would dip into all of the other three again on and off over the coming years. Eventually I ended up finding what would be my second favourite magazine when '*Your Spectrum*' morphed into '*Your Sinclair*' in January of 1986. I ended up buying every issue of that publication until I moved on from my Spectrum. I then spied on the newsagent's shelf and bought issue 5 of a magazine called, oddly enough, '*Crash*' and dated June 1984. In computer language if your computer had 'crashed' then it had gone wrong and here was a magazine named after the occurrence. Now this was more like it.

This particular edition bore a front cover featuring spaceships taking part in a spectacular battle, swooping down through a trench which, if you looked closely, was made of Spectrum tape boxes. *Newsfield*, the publishers of '*Crash*', had been set up by Roger Kean, Oliver Frey and Franco Frey in 1983 and had started off as a mail order software catalogue based in Ludlow, Shropshire. '*Crash*' had, by far, the best-looking cover out of all the magazines I'd bought. It was also the one magazine that appeared to have the most content and took me the longest to read through. I carried that particular issue about with me everywhere I went for the next few weeks. There was so much in the magazine that it seemed, upon each subsequent re-read, I'd still find another review or article that I'd missed previously. It really was jam packed. Also, I was finding that I tended to agree with most of the reviews contained in '*Crash*'. If they had given a game a good review, I'd find a copy, load it up and it would, in general, be as '*Crash*' said. Apparently, the trick that the editor had found to ensure the reviews were spot on and were not swayed by advertising budgets and corporate pub lunches, was to get school children in to review the games. Children tended to be brutally honest so if a game was deserving of a good review then the magazine would reflect that and vice versa if a game happened to be complete rubbish. Children were too young to be bribed with posh lunches and free booze, which some publishers were wont to try with the more adult members of magazine staff.

A few months later the day of my fourteenth birthday came along on Tuesday 12 June 1984. What on earth was I going to buy with my birthday money I wonder? I walked the fifteen-minute walk along the Wellingborough Road down to NHCC. The shop was on Abington Square and hadn't been there all that long. Situated next door to a filthy looking taxi firm it wasn't anything too glamorous but soon served as a

second home for me. NHCC had been set up by two fellows called Graham Wilson and Ken Lower. It was the only independent shop in Northampton to solely cater for the ever-increasing home computer market and, by the look of how busy it was now getting, was doing well.

I had noticed few previews of a certain game, in the magazines I'd been buying, by a firm called New Generation. The 'C&VG' preview in particular had featured a full colour map made of the actual screen graphics and I thought it looked beautiful. I had been doing my homework beforehand, my mind was made up and, in retrospect, I chose wisely. I found the object of my desires on the shelf and handed the empty box with my six pounds over to Ken who was at the till. He hunted down the tape from the drawers and numbered envelopes behind him, put it in the box, handed me my receipt and five pence change. I had crossed over. I was now a fully-fledged member of the 'games buying public' that I had read about in the computer magazines. My first home computer game purchase of my very own was a copy of *'Trashman'* on the ZX Spectrum for £5.95 and coded by Malcolm Evans.

I still had some money left and couldn't see anything in NHCC that I fancied adding to my already purchased title. I wandered further into town and had a look at the much smaller selections of games in Boots and WHSmith. These both had good computer departments in them at the time with a selection of machines set up alongside television screens at head height (if you were an adult. We children had to look up and risk straining our necks). It was always worth a look just in case one of the shops had a game cheaper than somewhere else. Sometimes they did and a bargain could be got. On occasion some scallywags would change the price stickers in Boots and WHSmith, take the game to the counter and get charged the cheaper price leaving the staff member none the wiser. I never did that, honestly. I knew that the look on my face when at the counter would be enough to let the staff member serving me know that something wasn't quite right and they'd check and I'd be arrested and locked up immediately. Anyway, nothing I could see took my fancy so I wandered back up to NHCC and had decided I was definitely going home with two games, not one.

For some unknown reason, I chose a game called *'Mrs Mopp'*, released on the Computasolve label and coded by one of the only female games programmers back then, Miss Tina Billet. I don't know why I chose that particular title. I had never heard of the game or seen any previews or reviews in the magazines. It just must have been the cartoony cover that have appealed to me and I was about to part-learn a valuable lesson, one that I have never forgotten and that I have put into practice many, many times since. I made my second purchase and walked home.

As soon as I got back, I loaded up *'Trashman'*. I was really pleased with it and, after having fun emptying bins, being chased by dogs, fed cheesy jokes by my customers, getting invited in for tea multiple times then getting hit by cars and cyclists, I thought I'd better see what *'Mrs Mopp'* was like. I had an inkling something might be up when I saw the loading screen, it wasn't very good. The graphics looked a bit like something you might have typed in from a magazine. The game loaded and I had my first go. My face dropped. Straight away I regretted buying it. It already looked old fashioned by June 1984 and it didn't come anywhere close as being as near as good as *'Trashman'*, which was 'well skill' (which is nineteen eighties talk for something good). "I've spent the rest of my birthday money on this rubbish", I thought. I did really try and like *'Mrs Mopp'* but it wasn't working. I had a couple of more goes but a game about a woman doing her household chores just didn't tick any of my boxes. Not only that but the graphics on the screen looked nothing like the cover! Playing it nowadays I can see that *'Mrs Mopp'* does have a certain charm about it and isn't anywhere near as bad as I thought it was back then. I was just gutted I'd spent nearly six pounds of my birthday money on it. The lesson I was part way to learning was - don't buy blind!

The next day, straight after school and after deciding that I was going to try and change *'Mrs Mopp'* for a different game, I walked back down to NHCC. As I entered Ken was again at the till. I hated having to take things back to shops and having to do so would make me really nervous. That was made even worse when I knew I was going to have to lie about my reason for returning it. I approached with some trepidation, "Hi! Er, yeah. I bought this yesterday with my birthday money but someone else already bought me the same game so I have two copies of it so can I change it please? I have the receipt", I said. Ken replied "Ah." He pulled a sympathetic smile "We don't change games once they've left the shop I'm afraid unless they're faulty. And then we'd only swop it for the same one". "But I've got two of the same game!" I lied. "Sorry, because of people copying games and trying to then bring them back we can only change it for the same game", Ken added in a pretend sad tone of voice. He knew I didn't have two of the same game and he probably knew it was crap too. No doubt it had been sat on the shelf for six months before muggings here came in the day before and took it off their hands. I hadn't even deemed the game good enough to make myself a copy of it. I didn't want it. I just wanted to get rid of it! I went home, in a mood and annoyed with myself for buying a game without knowing anything about it first. It did take a few times before that lesson sunk in, as you will find out soon, but sink in it did, eventually.

NHCC was a long narrow shop and, as you walked in, in front of you was the main wall covering shelves full of games software. To your left was the first shelf unit that covered the back of the window display and that was crammed full of Commodore 64 titles then, at a right angle to that one were the next three. Another shelf containing more Commodore titles was first then, to its right, two more shelves full of Spectrum software. At the bottom of these units were titles for the lesser popular machines like the BBC B, Acorn Electron, Atari 800 and Commodore 16. Most of those were budget games – full price titles were few and far between and when they did stock them they didn't sell too well so if you were unfortunate enough to own one of those machines you'd have to place an order for it, leaving a deposit, then wait a few days for it to come in. New releases and titles that were selling well were always placed at head height so that you didn't have to look hard to find them. As you turned right the till was set in the middle of the shop on the left. Behind here was all the live stock, duplicates of new releases and the drawers containing the tapes that went into the boxes that belonged to the copies out on display. No games were ever put out live as, if they had been, wouldn't have stayed on the shelves very long, disappearing into unscrupulous people's pockets. People would even, on occasion, steal game inlays, leaving the empty boxes with a price sticker attached on the shelf. Had an inlay been stolen, leaving the shop with an official but unsellable tape, the software distributors wouldn't supply any extra inlays to replace them because they'd then run of the risk of unscrupulous shop owners making illegal sales by selling copied tapes.

On top of all four shelves was where all the joysticks and computer add-ons were displayed. These were put out live but due to them being a lot bulkier than tape games which made the possibility of robbing them much harder to accomplish without being caught. Though I dare say that a few people were successful in doing so. Also, there was just no room in the shop to store hardware items anywhere else other than in the box they came in. Past the till and into the back of the shop on the left was a smaller shelf containing Amstrad CPC 464 tapes and 6128 discs. The shop didn't stock a lot of disc titles for either the Commodore or Amstrad as they just didn't sell as well as the tapes. They were usually only ordered in as special orders where customers would request what game they wanted, pay a non-refundable deposit and a form would be filled out with the title, machine, amount paid and name and address of the customer. Disc based games were quite a bit pricier than their tape counterparts so it didn't make good business sense to have those titles sitting on the shelves for months. If a customer then changed their mind after the game had been ordered then they lost their deposit and the title was put out on the shelves. If it didn't sell then the shop lost less money than one that hadn't been ordered in via a deposit. At the far end of the shop was the business section consisting of business computers, printers and software. NHCC sold the early Amstrad PCW range of Word Processing computers as well as the Amstrad 1512 and 1640 DOS based PC's. I knew nothing about them. They looked way too complicated.

At the back of the shop and on the right was a rank of televisions set up with a ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 under each one as well as an Amstrad CPC 464 or 6128 with a colour monitor. This was where you could, if you asked nicely and wasn't a known time waster, load up a potential purchase to try out to assist you in making your decision on whether you really wanted to buy a certain game or not. If a customer, having bought a game, brought it back to the shop saying it wouldn't work the offending title would be loaded up in the shop, providing the machine it was made for was set up. This all happened in front of the customer so they could clarify to the member of staff dealing with them what the problem was. Usually there was nothing at all wrong with the tape and it would load first time. Having it load up in the shop proved to the customer that there was nothing wrong with the tape itself and was usually followed by the staff member serving them saying "There's obviously something wrong with your set up. Are your tape heads aligned? Have you cleaned the heads?" Another reason for customers bringing tapes back included trying to swap a game for another because they had really decided they just didn't like that particular game, like me and my *'Mrs Mopp'* tape previously. This wasn't a good enough reason to swap games - NHCC didn't sell games 'on approval'. The shop wasn't a library. It would be pointed out to the customer that they could quite easily have tried the game out in the shop beforehand or waited until the game had been reviewed in the magazines and read those first before parting with their cash. The customer may have also made an illegal copy at home, thinking now that they didn't need the original tape and wanted their money back. That was a well-known occurrence. The staff at NHCC could tell straight away who was using this particular lie as the offer of a replacement tape of the same game was usually met with being told to "Fuck off then!" followed by the customer stating, just before they flounced out the front door, that they would "never buy anything from this establishment again!" As the shop door closed we would all laugh out loud at that particular comment as the customer obviously thought that the loss of their custom would result in the imminent and complete closure of the shop and the loss of everyone's jobs. Usually, these people weren't even regular customers! In reality they were only annoyed because the penny had dropped that they were on to their ruse and weren't going to let them get away with it.

Sometimes people would bring a game back and, upon inspection by the staff, it would be evident that the customer had 'accidentally' forgot to put the tape back in the box. Did they really think they'd accept a return without opening the damn thing first? On rare occasions customers had actually removed the two tape reels in the cassette itself and replaced them with reels taken out of a blank C15. Thing was though, the staff at NHCC had seen and heard it all before and were well aware of the various tricks people would use to try and return a game and get another one for free. Customers had to work hard to catch the staff at NHCC out.

Right at the back of the shop was where the various printers were set out on display, ready to demonstrate to potential customers what each machine's print quality was like. Above all the shelves were poster displays of new releases. Distribution companies would send their reps out every few weeks who would each have a part of the shop's wall put by for their use only. They would arrive with rolls of brand-new posters and make creative displays armed with just a stapler in hand. Regular customers could ask for certain posters to be put by to take home when the time had come for them to be taken down. A poster box was placed by the front door. Old displays that weren't claimed were put into the box and customers could buy them for 10p each then use them to decorate their own bedrooms. Right at the back of the shop was a further door that led to the shop's office. A door to the right led down to the cellar where the computers brought in for repair were taken apart and fixed. The shop had its own smell too. A mixture of hot televisions, 'Mr Sheen' furniture polish, solder and a coffee percolator all added to the aroma.

I spent the next few months acquainting myself with the wonders of the ZX Spectrum. I religiously started buying each issue of 'Crash' every month and so did most of my Spectrum owning school mates. Each new issue was much anticipated and, as 'Crash' would print the date the next issue was due in the shops, we would all know when to start looking out for it in the shops. On occasion an issue would reach the shelves a few days early and catch us all unaware. Someone at school would come into the classroom flashing the new edition about which would then be followed by cries of "Where'd you get that?", "Let's have a look", "Did they have many on the shelf?" and "It's not supposed to be out yet!" As each new issue was bought I would first locate the review index and find out which new games they had reviewed. A quick scan of the magazine would follow to see which of those titles had received the coveted *Crash Smash* award - a seal of approval given to only the highest quality new titles. I would take a particular note of the percentage marks given to the graphics, as that was the aspect of any game I was most interested in, and the overall score. I decided that anything that had earned over 75%-ish was worthy of a place in my game collection. On a couple of occasions the magazine would arrive in the shops late which would have been preceded with many trips all over town on my Chopper bike visiting every newsagent in the area to see if any of them had it on their shelves. During my free time indoors, when I wasn't playing ZX Spectrum games, I was reading 'Crash' magazine. My favourite section that I would always thumb through the magazine to read first was called 'Merely Mangram' where they would preview the games that were currently being written. I savoured reading about what the software companies were currently developing and discovering information about the games I might be playing in two- or three-months' time. Sometimes the names of the games would change before they came out, features that had been planned weren't always possible due to time and memory constraints and I was fascinated about how the games were actually made. I didn't have a clue of course about how this happened but still found this section my go to part of 'Crash' whenever I got my hands on a new issue.

Despite spending huge amounts of my free time on my ZX Spectrum I still went to the park and played out in the streets, as I had before, but not as much. I hadn't turned into a complete computer obsessed geek. We still had two dogs at home, Cass and Rinsky, so I would still take them out over the park on a weekend afternoon or go out on my bike to ride round the streets after school in the summer. Cass had joined us sometime in 1980. Mum and Dad had got her from a rescue home thus saving her from being put down. It was only a few weeks later we discovered she had been pregnant and that was the reason someone had taken her to a vet to die. How awful was that? Cass had the head of an Alsatian and a black and white body and soon gave birth to eight beautiful, black and white puppies. My sisters and I would look forward to waking up each morning so we could let the pups out of the kitchen where they slept so we could play with them.

Weekend trips to the outdoor swimming pools at Overstone and Billing with Uncle John, Paul and Hayden were still a regular occurrence though Wellingborough's indoor swimming pool became our destination during the winter months. Acquiring and becoming obsessed with my Spectrum didn't turn me into a goggle-eyed hermit. The healthy activities that we enjoyed before the days of computer games were still part of our recreation time, neither did we have to be dragged to them kicking and screaming. Hayden and I went via our own volition. The games hadn't replaced what we used to do but had merely complemented them, thus enriching our childhood experiences. On Saturdays and after our afternoon activities then we'd sit down for our spaghetti on toast (with butter!) to watch 'The Tripods' (a BBC

adaptation of John Christopher's novels. Series one was broadcast in 1984 and series two the following year) or *'Robin of Sherwood'* (produced by HTV. That ran for three series from 1984 to 1986. Robin was played by Michael Praed in series one and two and Jason Connery took over the reins for series three).

I had a good circle of mates who had Spectrums and everyone would let everyone else copy each other's new purchases as and when they were released and bought. I was fortunate because one of my mates Stephen Reynolds and now referred to by his nickname, Rennie, seemed to have at least a hundred pounds a week floating about. What didn't go on Farah trousers, Puma trainers, Sergio Tacchini track suits (designer labels were completely foreign to me at the time and this was the first time I'd ever come across them), all bought from a shop called Two Seasons on the Wellingborough Road, went on new Spectrum games. I bought an original game when I could, which wasn't very often, but I still wasn't waiting for reviews before making my purchases. I'd still let the adverts and the blurbs in the hyped-up previews influence my decision on what to buy so I did end up buying a few duffers. It wasn't easy to purchase original new ZX Spectrum games while only earning the paltry amounts I was getting from the moccasin factory so I still had to rely on Birthday's and Christmas's and the one and five pound notes that fell out of the cards for most of my purchases.

By 1984 we had acquired some of our own lingo. We greeted our mates not with a "Hello" or "Good morning" but with an "At cha!" which, if said properly would have been "At you". I've no idea how this started but everyone did it at school and from there it spread to being used by us out of school too. In fact, there was quite a few words and phrases we used back then that have stuck with me but I rarely use or hear anyone else using any more:

- 1) **"At cha"** = Hello.
- 2) **"Rare"** (i.e. "Look at his rare trainers/glasses/shoes/haircut/pencil case/trousers") = Awful.
- 3) **"Well skill"** = Very good.
- 4) **"Blockered"** (i.e. "You've been well and truly blockered right down to the ground") = proved wrong.
- 5) **"Backshot"** (i.e. "He nearly gave him a backshot!") = Getting too close to the boy in front in the school dinner queue or seeing someone giving a mate a 'backy' on a bike.
- 6) **"Sussed"** (i.e. "You've been well sussed") = It's been discovered you have not been telling the truth.
- 7) **"Shamed"** (i.e. "You've been well shamed") = Said when someone did something embarrassing. Like slip over in the ice, wee'd themselves or started a fight with someone during which they got thrashed.

The current edition of *'Crash'* featured the first advert I'd seen for a new game from a company called Ultimate Play the Game and this game was titled *'Sabre Wulf'*. This was the first new Ultimate title to be released during my time as a Spectrum user. I had been made well aware of the company already as all of their previous Spectrum work had featured, in various places, in my collection of pirated tapes. Ultimate Play the Game had been set up in 1982 by two brothers called Chris and Tim Stamper, though we didn't know their names or anything about them both at this point, in nearby Ashby-De-La-Zouch which was situated just under 52 miles from Northampton. The brothers had started out by making a few early arcade games – *'Blue Print'* for Bally Midway and *'Saturn'*, *'Grasspin'* and *'Dingo'* for Jaleco among them – but had now transferred their attention to the booming home computer market and, more specifically, the ZX Spectrum machine. Their first four Spectrum games, *'Cookie'*, *'Tranz Am'*, *'Pssst'* and *'Jet Pac'*, had all been written to fit in the smaller 16k Spectrum machines. Their next releases, *'Lunar Jetman'* and *'Atic Atac'*, both took advantage of the larger memory that the bigger 48k machine offered and showcased slightly more complex gameplay than their 16k siblings. Everybody who had owned a ZX Spectrum had most, if not all, of the games by Ultimate, though usually only as a copy. I didn't know anyone who owned original shop bought copies of any of their output though I had seen some of them on the shelves in the computer shop. I'd enjoyed playing most of Ultimate's games. *'Jet Pac'* and *'Atic Atac'* were the titles I loaded up the most. I was never taken by *'Lunar Jetman'* though. That particular game was just way too hard for me to play. I'd barely manage to be able to get Jetman off the floor before being hit by an object resulting in him tumbling down to floor dead with each attempt. All of Ultimate Play the Game's titles were super slick and professional looking games with great, arcade quality graphics and nice sound effects. Those titles set the benchmark for what well written Spectrum games should look, play and sound like.

All of Ultimate's titles followed exactly the same loading routine – it was like a trademark of the company. When you had decided you wanted to play an Ultimate Play the Game title you'd type 'LOAD "" then 'ENTER' on the Spectrum keyboard and press play on the tape. The basic loader would load into the computer that, once completed, the whole screen, including the border, would turn black. A basic and quick beeper tune would play while the computer printed a flashing message on the screen informing you of which game you were loading. This was followed by a wonderful looking loading screen – again, showing everyone else how to do it properly. The biggest block of machine code would then follow, which was the

main meat of the game itself, followed by three short sections of further code at the end. Once those were done the game actually started. The only thing missing from their first releases were tunes. There were none. Also, Ultimate Play the Game didn't use any copy protection on any of their games. They all loaded in using the normal Spectrum loading routine so this made making pirate copies really easy. Anyone could use the simplest of copying programs, like *'The Key'*, to make themselves a copy on a blank tape that was as good quality as one bought from a shop. Then the only thing that would be missing was the artwork and the instructions. I could look at an advert to see the cover of the game and a pen and paper was all that was needed to write down any necessary instructions. This, of course, cost the company thousands of pounds in lost revenue as most ZX Spectrum owners were getting to play their games for the price of a blank tape. Of course, Ultimate could have put some sort of protection on their games to make things harder for kids to make copies but they chose not to. Header-less files – which most copiers couldn't read – could make things tricky but that particular issue could be overcome by using a good tape to tape recorder. Added to that, some of the new copying programs, most notably the ones released by a company called Lerm, were now able, to some degree, to do this just as well as *'The Key'* did with normal loaders.

Ultimate now had a new title almost ready for release and the advertisement for it started popping up in all of the latest magazines. The mysterious looking artwork gave nothing away about *'Sabre Wulf'*. No screenshots or any other information about the game was in evidence, just the name of the game. None of us had too long to wait though as soon the news came that someone had seen the game on the shelf at the computer shop. Not only that but the game had been released in an impressive looking big black box and not the usual plastic cassette box, as their older games had been. "Well? Do you know anyone who's actually got it yet?" I asked. "It's a tenner though. Nearly double the price of their other games. I haven't got a tenner!" came the reply. Those earlier Ultimate titles had retailed at £5.50 each and *'Sabre Wulf'* was now nearly double the cost, advertised as retailing at £9.95. Apparently, the increase in price was deemed necessary by the authors as the game had taken longer to develop than their previous releases. There was also the rumour that Ultimate thought that a customer who had purchased *'Sabre Wulf'* for five pence short of ten pounds would be less likely to give out free copies to their mates due to the increased size of the cash outlay they had needed to stump up to buy it. That didn't make much sense to me. All it took was for one person to allow a mate to make a copy of their original *'Sabre Wulf'* then that person, who hadn't paid a penny – thus wouldn't have had any qualms about the price it was out in the shops for – would let another person make themselves a further copy, opening the flood gates for everyone else. Within a few days we all had a copy of *'Sabre Wulf'* and everyone was talking about how good it was. Again, Ultimate hadn't done themselves any favours by releasing the game with no copy protection. I could still use the, now ageing, *'The Key'* to make myself a fresh copy that would load in just as easily as an original tape. The game was an action-adventure maze game set in a jungle and the object was to find four pieces of an amulet that needed to be joined back together, while avoiding or battling various creatures, in order for Sabreman to be able leave the jungle that he currently found himself trapped in. The graphics were astounding. Never before had we had a game to play at home that looked so colourful. The various plants, ponds, mountains and rocks that made the maze contained in the game looked beautiful. Not only that but the animation of Sabreman was amazing. Complete with pith helmet and equipped with a sabre sword to aid him in combating the various hippos, natives, scorpions, bats, spiders, frogs and other creatures that inhabited the jungle Sabreman zipped around the landscape on the television screen. A press of the 'fire' button resulted in Sabreman whipping out his weapon as he slashed and stabbed in a glorious looking sequence that really was one of the best that had been seen on the Spectrum up to that point. He almost looked like one of the Three Musketeers!

'Sabre Wulf' was also the first game from Ultimate Play the Game to feature music. The main title tune was a beeper rendition of Johann Sebastian Bach's *'Prelude in C Major BWV 846'* from his *'Well Tempered Clavier'* collection (<https://youtu.be/frxT2qB1POQ>). A further shorter tune played when you selected '0 Start Game' on the menu and one more tune could be heard when you had used up all your lives and the game came to an end. The only thing that put me off with *'Sabre Wulf'* was that the authors had used their usual and, in my opinion, nonsensical layout for the keyboard controls – 'Q' for left, 'W' for right, 'E' for up, 'R' for down and 'T' for fire. This always took some time to get used to and I always seemed to confuse the two up and down keys with each other and inadvertently ended up making the character move up when I really wanted him to move down. In the confusion I'd usually end up losing a life by running in to the baddy I had been trying to run away from. I had been used to playing games using 'Q' for up, 'A' for down, 'O' for left, 'P' for right and either 'M' or 'SPACE' for fire. A lot of games were now adopting this control layout – it made the most sense to me – and those that didn't sometimes let you change the keys used within the program by offering a 'redefine keys' option. Ultimate's games didn't. We were stuck with QWERT! At this point in time I didn't have a joystick so I had to make do with the keyboard controls to play

my games. Once I'd got used to the irksome layout, I spent many hours playing 'Sabre Wulf' and it soon became one of my most played games so far.

My second edition of 'Crash' magazine – issue 6 from July 1984 – had featured their review of 'Sabre Wulf' and, due to the fact that a finished copy had only turned up at their offices just before that particular issue had to go to press – had been unable to award it a set of overall percentage ratings that all the reviewers could agree on. Also, by the time this edition of 'Crash' hit the newsagent's shelves the game had already been out and available to buy for at least two to three weeks so we'd all had a fair amount of time to play the game for ourselves. The game was rightly *Smashed* by 'Crash' and their review ended with:

"Ratings: At short notice it has been difficult to give an actual rating for 'Sabre Wulf' that would make sense, and it's probably redundant anyway. Let's just say 'unrateable!' and leave it for you to decide."

That was the first time and only time 'Crash' had been unable to give a game an overall rating. Even they thought that 'Sabre Wulf' was way above and beyond anything else that had been released previously. The game really did leave the rest of the current crop of Spectrum titles far behind. Spectrum owners soon found something to complain about though as, once the novelty of the graphics had started to wear off, they found that 'Sabre Wulf' was, more or less, 'Atic Atac' but set in a jungle instead of a haunted house. The gameplay was a little bit similar admittedly but you can't really blame Ultimate for, having had a huge hit with 'Atic Atac', expanding on and improving the game's mechanics for 'Sabre Wulf'. More complaints were to follow regarding the huge price increase. Was 'Sabre Wulf' worth nearly double the amount of money that 'Atic Atac' had cost? I dare say most of the people who had written into magazines to complain didn't even have an original copy in the first place so hadn't paid a penny for the pleasure. Still, 'Sabre Wulf' sold bucket loads and was soon topping all the computer game charts that were printed in the various magazines. The game had proved to the software companies that the games buying public were now prepared to pay more cash for their games. Other companies soon followed suit and it wasn't long before the usual price for a full price game had risen from £5 or £6 each to at least £7.95. The £9.95 price tag that 'Sabre Wulf' had used would still be reserved for the more premium titles.

I was now a regular visitor at NHCC and was getting to know the staff who worked there. It was always an exciting moment when you first saw a new game that you'd been reading about in previews and seen adverts for in 'Crash' and other magazines for months before sitting there on the shelf finished, packaged and ready to buy. At last, you could actually load the game up in the shop and see it running then ask yourself if this was one that warranted being added to your own collection or not. It was such an exciting time to be a home computer owner and be actively interested in what was going on. My mates and I were witnessing the first generation of home computer games and things were changing so fast that games were already looking out of date and old fashioned when they were barely two months old. We didn't realise this at the time but we were part of the last generation of children to experience a time where there were no computer games. Things would never really be the same again.

Around July/August time the first in a series of Wally Week games, 'Automania' by Mikro-Gen, was the first title to be released that used a new speeded up data format called hyperload, that made copying a game using a copier program virtually impossible. The technique ensured that, in order to get a tape to tape copy to work, you had to have access to an original version - something that wasn't always possible. Hyperloads did the most, in my opinion, to try and thwart playground piracy by actually speeding up the data on the tape itself. The one advantage of a hyperload game was that it loaded in faster than a normal loader but the data itself had to be of higher quality than normal in order for the computer to read it properly - an advantage to the makers of the game or course but a disadvantage to your average 14 year old Spectrum owner who only owned a handful of bought games. The box 'Automania' came in had the words 'HYPER-LOAD' printed boldly in white on the front and, once we'd seen the game loading in, wondered how we were going to be able to make copies of games using this new loading technique. This, momentarily, caused a lot of head scratching. Cassette player tape heads would have to have the azimuth alignment spot on in order for the game to load. The heads would also have to be as clean as a whistle before you even attempted to duplicate the data on to your own blank tapes. It would usually take three or four attempts at making a duplicate copy of a hyperload game before you found that you had one that worked. The system ensured that you could no longer just copy a game using 'The Key' and be safe in the knowledge that the copy would work. Each duplication of a hyperload game was followed by a test in order to make sure that the copy that had just been made actually loaded into the Spectrum without crashing the machine. The worst part was that, usually, the game wouldn't crash until the very end of the load, even if the error had been registered early on in the loading sequence. The software makers were wising up to what we children were up to in the playground and the war against piracy had taken another step forward.

By now I had become a big fan of a software company called Ocean Software who were situated up north in Manchester. I really liked almost all of their games I'd managed to get and had spent many hours playing the likes of 'Pogo', 'Hunchback', 'Gilligan's Gold', 'Moon Alert', 'Kong' and 'Cavelon'. Not only did their games have good graphics and, usually, a nice synthesiser sounding tune, the loading screens were second to none. Some, like the screens produced for games like 'Eskimo Eddie' and 'Pogo', were simply stunning to look at. The majority of these great screens bore the signature of one D. F. Thorpe and all of his screens were of the highest quality. I would marvel at the image on my television screen as the blue and yellow bars danced away in the border to the screeches of the data as the game loaded in and wished that I knew how to produce something that looked as great as that on my own TV.

In the autumn of 1984 Ocean released a new game called 'Daley Thompson's Decathlon', a game that everyone seemed to be raving about. Hayden and I were dismayed to find that Ocean had started to use a new hyperload called the 'Speedlock Protection System' which made it even harder than a normal hyperload to make a tape to tape copy. The system had been developed by David Aubrey Jones and David Looker in 1983 that, as well as loading in faster than a traditional load, had a weird clicking on the Spectrum headers. As the clicking header loaded in the whole screen including the border went black for a second – other loaders didn't do this. 'Speedlock' made copying even harder to do successfully than just straight hyperloads – the anti-piracy system was evolving. Ocean's previous games had been released using normal Spectrum loaders which meant we could make a clean copy by using 'The Key' to load in each section then save it off on to a brand-new tape. 'Daley Thompson's Decathlon' would have to be copied using tape to tape and that was only really worth doing if you had access to an original tape, which we didn't. We had always wanted a good 'Track and Field' type game to play at home after seeing it in the arcades at Billing Aquadrome. This seemed to be the one that made our dreams come true. The only game that came close to this previously was 'Micro Olympics' by Database Publications Ltd and released earlier in the year. That game was okay but had naff graphics and looked decidedly primitive compared to Ocean's new effort. One of Hayden's friends had lent us a copy of 'Daley Thompson's Decathlon' but it wasn't an original – it was on a C90 cassette along with other copied games. We tried different tape decks, different leads, and different brands of tapes until, after about two hours, we finally managed to get ourselves a working copy. We cheered when we actually succeeded in getting our copies to load up all the way without the Spectrum crashing. We carefully left everything set up as it exactly was when that latest, working copy, was made and completed the copying process. This was made even more difficult as 'Daley Thompson's Decathlon' came with two programs, each with different events. In order to experience the whole of Ocean's new game we would have to make working copies of both programs. It took a lot of patience but we felt it was worth it as we were now able to play this brilliant new game on our own computers. We were somewhat flabbergasted when 'Crash' didn't give the game a *Smash* when they reviewed it in their tenth issue from November 1984. It received an overall rating of 82%! While the review was favourable, it fell short of the usual 90% plus a game would need to be awarded a *Smash*. We both, and any of our mates who now also had the game, felt it really had deserved one and it was one of the few times me and Hayden didn't agree with the review 'Crash' had written. We loved 'Daley Thompson's Decathlon'.

The first time I saw the preview of a new game by Gargoyle Games titled 'Tir Na Nog' in issue 8 of 'Crash' from September 1984 I was floored by the screenshot from the game that had accompanied the article. Written by Greg Follis and Roy Carter 'Tir Na Nog' was only the second game by the team, their first being the graphically impressive shoot 'em up 'Ad Astra'. That game had received a favourable review back in the May 1984 edition of 'Crash' and received an overall mark of 80%. Previous to this a lot of home computer games had the player in control of a really rather small main character, sometimes with barely any animation to simulate movement. 'Tir Na Nog' featured a huge, 56-pixel character called Cuchulainn who was "animated in no less than 64 separate frames" and that the finished game "possesses some of the most amazing animated graphics ever seen on a Spectrum". In 'Tir Na Nog' Cuchulainn seeks the Seal of Calum in the land of the dead. The preview described the game as being the closet, so far, we had got to experiencing "a computer movie" - a term I'd not heard before. "The result is a very large character who walks, turns and thrusts with his sword in liquid animation as good as a Walt Disney cartoon character could". Liquid animation? Sounds good. It looked just my cup of tea and couldn't wait to see and hear more about it.

In the same 'Crash' a different game was previewed that would also warrant my undivided attention. 'The Legend of Avalon' had been written by Steve Turner and was set to be released on the Hewson Consultants label. Steve had a few games under his belt already having already written '3D Space Wars' and its follow ups '3D Seiddab Attack' and '3D Lunattack' for the same label. His latest title looked amazing. I had copies of Steve's three older games in my collection of pirate tapes but hadn't taken that much notice of them. I didn't think anything was wrong with them as such but they just didn't really grab me at the time. Steve was a one-man game maker and did all his own graphics and music too – something that was

getting increasingly hard to pull off as the overall quality of games improved. He was obviously a bit of a wizard at all three aspects of games' production. My first impression of *'The Legend of Avalon'* was that the author had managed to bring to life all those Citadel Miniatures that I'd collected a few years earlier on the Spectrum screen. The player controlled a Wizard called Maroc who was on a quest to destroy the Lord of Chaos and was set in dark, spooky dungeons that were all inhabited by various goblins, elves and warlocks. Spells could be cast to aid your quest though you could never actually die as you were controlling Maroc's astral projection and not Maroc himself. This time the game was being described using the term 'Adventure Movie'. Yet another term I'd not heard before. It all looked very weird and wonderful and I added this title, along with *'Tir Na Nog'*, to the list of games I had in my head that I couldn't wait to actually sit down and play.

On Sunday 23 September 1984 at 9:30pm we sat down as a family and watched *'Threads'* on BBC 2, a well-publicised drama about a nuclear war and its effect on the town of Sheffield. The plot centres on two families as a confrontation between the United States and Russia erupts. As the nuclear exchange between NATO and the Warsaw Pact begins, the film depicts the social, medical, economic and environmental consequences of nuclear war. The film terrified me. We had all been aware of the possibility of something like this happening for real. We had all been watching the news recently, and to see it all played out the television screen didn't make it any easier to deal with. In fact, it made it worse. The programme was far scarier than any horror film I had managed to see up to that point. Those were made up stories and weren't very likely to happen in real life. This could and the next day at school everyone was talking about *'Threads'*. It's funny though, the bit that most of us remembered the most was when the bomb actually went off over Sheffield. We saw a lady who was witnessing the huge, dark mushroom cloud rise up over her hometown weeing herself in the street. The camera panned down to show it coming out of the bottom of her trousers, splashing on to her shoes and on to the pavement. We all thought *that* was hilarious!

As the Christmas period came ever closer two very mysterious and atmospheric adverts started to appear in the game magazines. I first spotted them in issue 10 of *'Crash'* from November 1984, the one featuring a huge futuristic joystick set in the middle of a space battle on the cover. These adverts were set next to each other to make an impressive looking double page spread. I have vivid memories of the first time I set eyes on the artwork for *'Knight Lore'* and *'Underwulde'* by Ultimate Play the Game. Not only did they look magnificent but there were two of them. Everyone had been expecting something to be released from Ultimate soon as they'd been very quiet since *'Sabre Wulf'*, the company's previous title, hit the shops the summer just gone. They took everyone by surprise though when it became evident that the wizards from Ashby-De-La-Zouch were about to release two new games at once. In school all my Spectrum owning mates were talking about the titles and were wondering what the games themselves were going to be like as there hadn't been any previews in any of the magazines. Not even one screenshot had been provided by the company to help publicise the two games in the run up to their release. At this point though Ultimate didn't need to. Their unrivalled reputation was more than enough to ensure more than healthy sales once the games were sitting on the shelves of the computer game shops. We were all full of questions as to what exactly the mighty Ultimate had in store for us next.

In the same issue *'The Legend of Avalon'* was finally reviewed and was the recipient of a *Crash Smash* award - receiving a mark of 94% for the graphics and an overall rating of 91%. The new screenshots *'Crash'* had printed to illustrate their review just made me want to get a copy of the game even more and the fact they'd Smashed it meant it must be brilliant. I just didn't have any money to go out and buy it for myself though. I added it to the mental list I had of games I had to get my hands on and I didn't have long to wait before word got out that a school friend had bought it but here was a catch. In the original packaging was a paper code sheet that had been provided on light blue paper with slightly darker blue text which made it impossible to photocopy. The way it worked was that once the game had loaded the screen asked you to enter a code from the sheet in order to get the game to run. Once it became evident that a photocopy just wouldn't work the only way to be able to do this without the code sheet was to physically sit down and write out the hundreds of codes yourself by hand. This form of copy protection had been used previously by Software Projects on their game *'Jet Set Willy'* but had been thwarted by the willingness of school kids to copy it all out by hand - that code sheet was relatively small and it didn't take that long to muster up a reproduction using a few felt tip pens. There was also a poke floating round that disabled the code sequence altogether. Input the poke into the basic loader before the RANDOMIZE USR statement (the routine that actually made the game run) and, once loaded, the screen asking for the code had gone. With *'Jet Set Willy'* there wasn't anywhere near as many possible code combinations as contained in this new game - *'The Legend of Avalon'* had many, many more. Obviously, this was deemed a necessity if I wanted to play the game so I spent the hour or so it took to copy out a code sheet for myself and a working

copy of *'The Legend of Avalon'* was gained. An original copy of the game also came with a really nice map printed on special paper that added to the atmosphere of the package.

The first time I loaded *'The Legend of Avalon'* I was a bit dismayed to see that no one had taken the time to make a loading screen for it. I always thought that having a nice loading screen to look at while a game loaded contributed to the atmosphere and anticipation. I made do with reading the preview and review in *'Crash'* again and gawping at the advertisement whilst I waited for it load. Upon completion I wasn't disappointed. My copied code sheet allowed me access to the game and I absolutely loved what I saw. I spent many hours, armed only with a glass of juice and a packet of cheesy flavoured Nik Naks - a bag of extruded corn made by Sooner Snacks - while holed up in my bedroom at Lutterworth Road on winter evenings after school, exploring the caverns contained within *'The Legend of Avalon'*. It didn't matter that I never managed to get very far in the game. Just having a go was enough. I loved the music too which sounded suitably medieval and spooky. The author, Steve Turner, had also written a separate musical ditty that played when the game was paused. All these little details helped make the game one of my favourites of all time.

Also featured in this issue of *'Crash'* was a double page spread devoted to a new game called *'Deus Ex Machina'* from Automata UK. I'd already seen a few previews of this new game which featured, among other weird and wonderful things, a huge graphic of a baby that was pictured as if it were still in a womb. I had never seen a Spectrum game with graphics as big or as detailed as this before. The game also came accompanied with a huge poster and a tape containing a proper soundtrack instead of in-game sound effects and tunes that you had to play alongside the game itself which was another first. It certainly looked very interesting judging by what had already been written about it in its various previews. *'Deus Ex Machina'* was designed by Mel Croucher, who started Automata UK originally in 1977 and was then joined by Christian Penfold in 1979, as the first computer games company in the UK. The game was coded by a fellow called Andrew Stagg. Automata UK were already well known for releasing games that weren't like other games. Mel was very anti-violence and ensured that all the games they released didn't involve killing anything else. So, there was no war or defending earth from alien invasion type games. Automata had a weird back catalogue that were all adorned with excellent and colourful artwork by Robin Evans and had their own company mascot, the Pi-Man. Older releases included *'My Name is Uncle Groucho... You Win a Fat Cigar'*, *'Pi-Eyed'*, *'Pi-Balled'*, *'Pi-In'Ere'*, *'Olympimania'*, *'Go to Jail'*, *'Pimania'* and *'Morris Meets the Bikers'*. The Pi-Man also had his own cartoon strip that was published weekly on the back page of *Popular Computing Weekly* that ran from early March, 1983 to 1986. So *'Deus Ex Machina'* was widely anticipated. Everyone was wondering what on earth it was going to be like and if we were about to experience the 'next phase' of computer games. When the game eventually arrived, the magazines didn't really know what to make of it. The *'Crash'* review didn't even give the game an overall mark and, reading the review, there didn't appear to be one comment informing the reader whether it was actually any good or not. Did they dare not say? In the shops *'Deus Ex Machina'* retailed for an eye watering £15. That was a huge amount of money when most games were still retailing around the £7-£8 mark. I needed to know if it was worth saving up for or not. *'Sinclair User's'* review from their December 1984 issue was a bit more informative and signed off with:

"In the final analysis Deus Ex Machina is a game to be played first and talked about later. So, go ahead and do it. We won't look but we will guarantee - well, almost - that you will be intrigued."

A bit cryptic that but at least the game scored 9 out of 10. *'Your Spectrum's'* review from the same month also spoke about the game favourably but, again, failed to score it. They said:

"If 'Deus Ex Machina' appeals to you then maybe it's worth the £15 price tag to own what's potentially an interesting chunk of computer history. But don't expect it to knock your socks off."

See, that last line was the one that put me off. If I was going to pay £15 for the game then I wanted to know I was going to get my money's worth. I wanted to be amazed. I didn't want to stump up the cash for a copy, end up playing it a couple of times then have it sat on the shelf doing nothing but gathering dust. £15 was a lot of money to a schoolboy back then. I asked Rennie if he was going to buy *'Deus Ex Machina'*. After all, he bought all the good new releases and didn't appear to have any cash flow issues. If he were going to buy it then I could have got a copy from him without having to risk spending any money. He told me that no, he wouldn't be getting it as it didn't look like his cup of tea. "Damn!" I thought, disappointed that I may not be able to try it out for myself. Not long after I walked down to NHCC one day after school and as I entered the shop and started perusing the shelves Conrad told me "That *'Deus Ex Machina'* came in today" - I'd obviously been asking about it before. "Oh great! How many did you get in?" I replied. "Just the one. It's

shit!" he said. I pulled a face and tutted. "What's wrong with it then? It looks good in the magazines", I asked. Conrad went on to explain that they'd tried it out earlier in the day and, while the graphics were good, the game itself just wasn't up to scratch. Straight away I knew I wasn't going to be spending any money on it but picked up the impressive looking video style case that *'Deus Ex Machina'* came in, read the blurb on the back and put in back on the shelf. The copy they had at NHCC sat around on the shop shelf for months, looking more dog eared with each consecutive visit, before being discounted and, eventually, sold. By all accounts, the game didn't sell at all well and was deemed a huge failure by the software buying public and its authors who'd sweated over the game for months beforehand. I never met anyone who bought *'Deus Ex Machina'* or anyone who had a pirated copy so I never played the game while it was still new. I only got to try the game properly years later around 2005 via emulation. I thought I'd sit down and give it a proper go and find out myself what the game was actually like. While I was impressed by what I had seen on the screen and how it matched up to what was going on in the accompanying audio I couldn't help but feel disappointed with the actual game itself. All that was required for the majority of the fifty or so minutes I spent 'playing' the game was to move a flashing cursor around the screen clearing away germs or infections by moving over them. When the game had finished its course I had a crummy 33% score. I had no idea what I'd done wrong or what I had to do in order to improve the score. The prospect of having to spend another fifty minutes trying to do so wasn't very appealing. It isn't a game you can just have a quick go on either, you have to play it right through to its conclusion each time. Another first that had passed me by back in the day was the fact that the game loaded in two halves, so in essence you didn't get 48k's worth of code, you got 96k. Halfway through playing it the computer would save your score then ask you to pause the audio tape, turn over the tape that contained the computer code and then proceed to load in the second part. It was the world's first multi-load home computer game.

'Deus Ex Machina' was a brave experiment but, in my opinion, the fact that it just wasn't much fun to play was the most probable reason the game failed. I admire Mel Croucher and the rest of the Automata UK team for trying to do something radically different from what everyone else was doing back in 1984 but I think it was a just a bit too far ahead of its time. The humble ZX Spectrum just wasn't advanced enough to provide the interactive experience that was required for it to work well enough though it remains an interesting curio in the history of computer games. Don't dismiss it completely though. I recommend, if you haven't had at least one go, you try it out and see what you think. At least now it's not necessary to fork out the £15 to do so due to the fact you can download an emulator, the data of the game itself and an mp3 of the soundtrack to play alongside it. Mel published a book in 2014 about the making of the game called *'Deus Ex Machina – The Best Game You Never Played in Your Life'* and published by Acorn Books. It's a fantastic read and, as you're reading this one now, I can whole heartedly recommend you hunt down a copy of it.

I had kept in touch with Adrian Singh after leaving Cliftonville. He too now had a 48k Spectrum and, as he was at a different upper school to me, had some Spectrum owning mates that I didn't know. That was useful as he would get games that me and my school mates didn't have and vice versa. Adrian went on, a few years later, to produce all the pokes for *'Sinclair User'* magazine and was known as 'Mr Poke' in its pages. Remember those yellow *'Poke City'* cards that *'Sinclair User'* gave away attached to their covers? Adrian wrote most if not all of those. I went round to his house regularly as he lived in Grove Road which was just a five-minute walk from NHCC. If I were in the area and wasn't in any great hurry to get anywhere else, I would pop over to his and see if he was in. I ensured that I was always armed with a blank cassette tape just in case he had any new Spectrum acquisitions I could copy. Adrian's bedroom was a small but cosy room on the upper floor and at the back of his house. I never ventured into any other room of the house, we never sat in his parents' living room for example. It turns out his Mum and Dad smoked at the time and Adrian didn't get on with the atmosphere that resulted so kept himself upstairs out of the way. As well as a rubber keyed 48k Spectrum Adrian had a Sinclair Interface One and Microdrive unit, the only one I had ever seen. The Microdrive allowed loading of data in seconds though had a reputation for not being very reliable. Luckily, he had one of the more stable units as I don't recall him having any major headaches with losing data as lots of other people reported. His computer was set up on a table with a colour television and a big twin tape player that was used for high speed dubbing of games on to blank tapes. Adrian's joystick of choice was one of those square based Atari 2600 joysticks with the red button on one side though I could never use it without my hand aching and feeling like I was holding a brick. Adrian had a few original games, *'Jet Set Willy'* by Software Projects was one. He also had *'Ad Astra'* too by Gargoyle Games and I remember that as I had never actually seen a real copy for sale in the shops, it being a game that came out before I had got my own ZX Spectrum, so had been and gone by the time I started perusing the shelves. Other titles he'd bought included *'Cookie'* and *'Jet Pac'* by Ultimate and Realtime's *'3D Tank Duel'* and *'3D Starstrike'*. Adrian too bought *'Crash'* every month but also purchased every copy of *'Your Spectrum'* as they covered the technical aspects, programming and machine code side

of the Spectrum more in depth than 'Crash' did. Adrian was learning Z80 machine code at the time so found the articles and tutorials they printed useful. That was all mumbo jumbo to me. I did have a look at the some of the stuff he was doing but it all went straight over my head and looked terribly complicated so I stuck to my own experimentation, trying to produce Spectrum graphics. Almost every time I went round to his he'd have a couple of brand-new games to show me and I'd sit on his bed while he demonstrated the latest titles. He'd then run me off a copy for my own collection. I'd also take round my latest copy tape and he'd copy my new titles for himself. He was soon hacking into games to provide the option for invincibility or infinite lives and would jot the relevant pokes down on scraps of paper for me to try out should I get stuck. He was also getting very adept at disabling the loading protection schemes that software companies would try and protect their games with and we would save off copies that loaded in at normal speed which improved the probability of them actually loading and made it easier to give out further copies to our mates. I was in awe of the stuff he was able to do.

I remember seeing 'Brian Bloodaxe' by The Edge at Adrian's and, upon loading, a nice synthesized tune played. The main character then walked off the screen and, much to my shock, the game promptly reset itself but only half of the Spectrum copyright message appeared on the screen. I thought it hadn't loaded in properly, had properly gone wrong and crashed. Had it actually broken the Spectrum? A second later a message appeared on the screen:

"I FEEL I SHOULD WARN YOU
THIS GAME FEATURES A HEAVY
DOSAGE OF 'PRIMARY IMBALANCE'
WHICH MAY BE INJURIOUS
TO MENTAL HEALTH

SHOULD YOU STILL WISH TO PLAY
THEN BLOW GENTLY ON THE KEYBOARD

DON'T SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU..."

Oh! 'Brian Bloodaxe' hadn't crashed! It was having us on and I, for one, was momentarily fooled. The game then started properly. Of course, Adrian knew what was happening as he had already loaded it before and watched me getting all flustered. It was a big deal back then if you'd waited five minutes for a game to load only to have it crash right at the end. The only thing you could do after that was start all over and try again which ate into game playing time.

I had also just purchased a copy of the new November issue of 'Sinclair User'. Taped on to the front of the magazine was a free booklet called 'Top 50 Spectrum Software Classics' which listed all the games they thought were essential purchases from those that had been released during the previous twelve months or so. I prided myself to having owned, not all legally obviously, most of the games included in it and tried my very best to hunt down the last few missing games. At the very back of the booklet was room to record my own top fifty games. So, one night I sat down in my bedroom and tried to fill it in. I managed fifteen before giving up. It was hard to think of fifty games, but the games I noted down were as follows:

01. 'Tir Na Nog' – Gargoyle Games. (<https://youtu.be/cUdO0DTU1ik>)
02. 'Daley Thompson's Decathlon' – Ocean Software. (<https://youtu.be/tbM-2C3P8v0>)
03. 'Trashman' – New Generation Software. (https://youtu.be/xUB_Mm9YBnA)
04. 'Pyjamarama' – Mikro-Gen. (<https://youtu.be/a-Dsq-zT9xg>)
05. 'Ad Astra' - Gargoyle Games. (https://youtu.be/0IFzv_-PBUI)
06. 'Legend of Avalon' – Hewson Consultants. (<https://youtu.be/bJh5gFnx8ro>)
07. 'Sabre Wulf' – Ultimate. (https://youtu.be/cJ_0KixP1ds)
08. 'Sherlock' – Melbourne House. (<https://youtu.be/z2t8crNKnpY>)
09. 'Dark Star' – Design Design. (<https://youtu.be/EowakhVFWp4>)
10. 'Stop the Express' – Sinclair Research. (https://youtu.be/Xze0SGFH_9s)
11. 'Jasper!' – Micromega. (<https://youtu.be/7rEbPt4XQaU>)
12. 'Chuckie Egg' – A&F Software. (<https://youtu.be/hphc1XV10Hc>)
13. 'Scuba Dive' – Durell. (<https://youtu.be/8KGtuepf3rw>)
14. 'Full Throttle' – Micromega. (<https://youtu.be/VmdLc37AX-o>)
15. 'Codename Mat' – Micromega. (<https://youtu.be/aHLrPYvPrdo>)

A week or so later word got round that *'Knight Lore'* and *'Underwulde'* had been seen for sale in shops. They existed. They were no longer just adverts in the magazines. Anyone who had the cash could now buy them and hold them in their hands. They were real, solid, physical objects. At last, the mystery of what these two games actually were about and what they looked like on the computer screen would soon be revealed to us. An Ultimate fan needed ten pence short of twenty quid to buy them both together and no one I knew had that much spare cash at that time to go and buy them. Rumours went round the school, questions were asked "Have you seen them yet?", "Do you know what they're like?" No one I knew had set eyes on them. Fortunately, I didn't have too long to wait. A few days later I was at home on a Thursday night and the phone went at around nine o'clock. It was Adrian. He was ringing to let me know that he'd got *'Knight Lore'* and *'Underwulde'* in their boxes, actually at his house. He had the originals. These were shop bought tapes and not copies. That was the important part. Adrian went on to tell me that now even Ultimate were using the *'Speedlock Protection System'* for their games. All of Ultimate's previous releases up to and including *'Sabre Wulf'* had used the normal, unprotected Spectrum loader. He informed me that he only had them for another hour at the most though, it was getting late and it was a school night. If I wanted a working copy from the original tapes then I should get round to his house as soon as possible. *'Knight Lore'* and *'Underwulde'* were to be given back to the owner at the end of this very evening. This was still only three or four days after the games had been released. They were still hot property and I had yet still to see them running.

I didn't have much time and I knew that by getting a dub from the original cassette massively improved my chances of getting a working copy of them both. If I had left it and not gone round that night then my copies would have been from Adrian's copies and generational loss from copying copies would lessen the chances of the versions on my tape actually loading in. Adrian knew a few Spectrum owners who had slightly richer parents and their offspring would be able to buy more of the latest titles than me or my friends could. He had been lent the originals from one of these lucky boys, but not straight away mind. Whoever he was, and I'm almost certain it was a 'he' - we didn't know any girls whatsoever who had any interest in computer games - had obviously had them to himself for a good few days, to show off to his mates first. I can just imagine how it went, "Look what I've got. The new Ultimate games!... No... Don't touch, you are only allowed to look at them... Are your hands clean?" This fellow had a head start on playing *'Knight Lore'* and *'Underwulde'* before all of us other lesser mortals could have a go. So, what did I do? The only thing I could do of course, I rushed round to Adrian's as fast as my skinny legs could carry me. His house was a good twenty-minute walk from mine and the weather was absolutely freezing and frosty so I ran as fast as I could, being ultra-careful not to skid on the white ice that was quickly forming on the pavement. I arrived at Adrian's house hot, sweaty and out of breath.

I knocked on the door and Adrian's Mum answered. By now she knew who I was so she let me go straight upstairs to his room. Still trying to catch my breath I saw that *'Knight Lore'* was already loaded and running. I looked at the television screen and my eyes widened. I could not believe what I was seeing. The graphics were unlike anything I or anyone else had ever seen before. Adrian, who'd already spent some time playing the game, was mightily impressed and was already singing *'Knight Lore's'* praises. An earlier Spectrum game, *'3D Ant Attack'* by Sandy White and released the year before by Quicksilver, had a similar viewpoint presented on the screen. Compared to Ultimate's new release though, the graphics for *'3D Ant Attack'* were very rudimentary. *'Knight Lore's'* graphics were big, well drawn and animated, solid objects that moved seamlessly and flicker free, in front and behind the other objects on the screen. Then, when the little icon of the sun at the bottom of the screen turned in to the moon the character you controlled, Sabreman, who had featured in Ultimate's previous title *'Sabre Wulf'*, contorted through an excellent animation that showed him twisting grotesquely as he transformed into a werewolf.

That night me and Adrian really did feel like we were experiencing a new benchmark in home computer games. How could a game on this small electronic black box with squishy keys look so good? We had no idea that it was capable of such things. We really did feel that playing the game was the nearest thing so far to being able to control a cartoon we had ever experienced. I was itching to have a go and my initial try out didn't last very long as I tried to get used to the controls and manoeuvre my way round the 3D environment set out on the screen in front of me. It quickly became evident that this was a top-notch title by the UK's then leading software house. I was so glad that I'd made my way over to Adrian's and hadn't left it for another day. While Adrian had another go I read the mystical instructions on the fold-out inlay card that came with the game – the smell of the freshly printed instructions hit my nose as I tried not to get it grubby with my sweaty fingers. Those Ultimate inlays, oddly enough, have a strange warm smell. Even now, if an original copy has been looked after properly over the years and hasn't been exposed to any damp or mould, it still smells the same, over thirty years later. Once I'd got over the excitement of seeing *'Knight Lore'* for the first time there was the second game *'Underwulde'* to look at. As with its sister title, the inlay and advertisement gave nothing away about what the game actually looked like – up to now none of

Ultimate's inlays had ever featured screenshots from the game it contained while lots of other companies did.

'*Underwulde*' was then loaded and while it wasn't as mind blowing as '*Knight Lore*' we both agreed that it looked great. The bouncing about of the main character hadn't really been done that well before in any game I'd seen previously. The nearest thing we had to compare it to was a title called '*Bugaboo*' by Quicksilva from 1983 where you had to control a flea and help him get out of a dragon dwelling cavern. In '*Underwulde*' swinging around on ropes and riding on bubbles was pretty new but how could the game compare to '*Knight Lore*'? A new dawn was upon us and that was the game that got everyone, and I mean everyone, talking. The only thing that disappointed us about '*Underwulde*' was that it hadn't been afforded any music whereas '*Knight Lore*' had. There were three tunes in '*Knight Lore*', the longest being the tune that played on the menu screen. Two further tunes featured when you started the game and when the game ended. '*Underwulde*' had nothing other than spot effects during the game. It was but a small issue.

Adrian set about making my copies of these hot new titles using his twin tape high speed dubbing ghetto blaster. Once the copies had been made, he then loaded them in to his ZX Spectrum to test them and ensure that they worked for me. I also wanted to see the '*Knight Lore*' loading screen which I'd missed earlier. That too was very impressive and, surprisingly, wasn't a rendition of the game cover art but a unique illustration showing a wizard casting a bright and colourful spell from his hands concocted from, now empty, ingredient bottles that could be seen laying at his feet. Upon testing both copies worked despite the '*Speedlock*' hyperload! I made my way home very excited. I didn't need to run this time so I walked. My copies of the games were safely in my pocket which I also gripped on to for dear life just in case they decided to pop out and drop on the floor without me knowing. I ensured I left with enough time for me to test the loading of each game and have a quick play at home on my Spectrum before I had to go to bed for school the next day. Today had been probably the most major event of my Spectrum games playing era so far.

Years later I was told by Paul Owens, who was working at Ocean Software at the time, that when '*Knight Lore*' was released a box turned up at Ocean from Ultimate containing multiple shrink-wrapped copies of '*Knight Lore*'. They hadn't requested these. The folks at Ultimate had posted them out to a selection of rival software houses as if to say "Here's our new release. This is how you do it". Paul recalls jaws hitting the floor as the staff at Ocean saw the game running for the first time.

Even more Ultimate related excitement arrived when the December 1984 issue of '*Crash*' appeared in newsagent's on Thursday 15 November. Alongside the two adverts for '*Knight Lore*' and '*Underwulde*' was a magnificent looking advert for yet another new game from the same company called '*Alien 8*'. Already? '*Crash*' hadn't even reviewed '*Knight Lore*' or '*Underwulde*' yet. My immediate thoughts were what on earth did Ultimate have lined up for us next? How could they improve on '*Knight Lore*'? Knowing that a new game was already on the way was almost too much to bear. The fourth page of the two double page Ultimate spreads held a newly designed advert for the older '*Sabre Wulf*' featuring brand new artwork that had been produced to match the style used for their three latest releases. This wasn't quite as exciting as a brand-new game but was still great to see. It looked much better than the previous art for the game, which was just the game's logo, albeit beautifully rendered, on a green background that faded to black. This new art featured the same logo but also showed a rendition of the completed amulet from the game sitting below it and surrounded by a nice jungle-themed border. It turns out that '*Sabre Wulf*' was now being released on the BBC B microcomputer and the new artwork had been made specifically for that.

'*Tir Na Nog*' was reviewed in the same '*Crash*' issue. Again, this was awarded a *Crash Smash* and gained a whopping 98% for its astounding graphics and 91% overall. Rennie bought '*Tir Na Nog*' himself on the day it came out so it was easy to borrow his original from him one school dinner time and run off a copy for myself. I was surprised to see no form of copy protection had been used on the game data. There wasn't any headerless sections of data or fancy hyperload. Anyone could copy '*Tir Na Nog*' with '*The Key*' - the really simple copier program I had been provided with on my first batch of pirated tapes. '*The Key*' couldn't handle any sort of copy protection and was useless in trying to make any copies of anything that had. '*Tir Na Nog*' came in a snazzy box with a twenty-eight-page booklet and a beautiful map but you didn't actually need them in order to play the game. I ended up drawing my own map for '*Tir Na Nog*' and partly burned it to give it that 'olde-worlde' and ancient look. This time the game did have a loading screen that contained this weird big head set in the middle of a forest. The shock I got when I found the same head in the game itself and saw its fine animation, the mouth moving as if it was talking to me, was quite pronounced. Seeing '*Tir Na Nog*' running for the first time was quite a revelation. No one had ever seen graphics like this on a home computer before and everyone who saw it commented on how great it looked. This 'liquid animation' quote from '*Crash*' really did describe how the game looked like to a tee. I hadn't got a clue how graphics like this were produced and thought, mistakenly, that Gargoyle Games had invented a system where you somehow inputted what the character looked like into the computer then the frames to

animate it were worked out automatically by this new technique, giving the finished product this 'liquid animation' look. I didn't realise till much later that Greg Follis just drew each frame by hand, pixel by pixel, until it looked good enough to put into the game.

On Thursday 13 December the 'Crash Christmas Special' appeared on the newsagent's shelves and what a magnificent issue it was, despite the 30p price increase (from 85p to £1.25). There was a fantastic Christmas themed Oliver Frey cover, a huge double-sided calendar/poster featuring new Oli artwork and the whole thing felt almost twice as thick as a regular issue. They'd reviewed the two new Ultimate games, Smashing them both. '*Knight Lore*' received the more favourable review, receiving 97% for its ground-breaking graphics and an overall mark of 94%. The reviewers were a little cooler in their review for '*Underwulde*' and rightly so. It was a good game but didn't offer the same advancement its sister title had presented. '*Underwulde*' received 95% for its graphics and an overall score of 92%.

That same night I was home alone and was sat in the living room thumbing through my new 'Crash' for the umpteenth time. Mum had taken Leanne and Nicola out somewhere and Dad had probably popped out for a quick pint up the pub. Around 8:04pm I was flicking through the television channels when I saw, on BBC 2, a ZX Spectrum being used. A young man was demonstrating a game for the boss of Ocean Software, David Ward. Turns out the game was called '*Pud Pud in Weird World*' and the young man shown demonstrating it was the author, though I did not know what his name was. Unbeknownst to me at the time I had caught the only broadcast of the '*Commercial Breaks; The Search for Santa's Software*' (online here: https://youtu.be/ChmQBK_EaUQ) documentary which charted the fall of Liverpool's Imagine Software and also filmed segments over in Manchester at Ocean's Central Street headquarters. Though I had unfortunately missed the very beginning I eagerly watched the remainder of the programme and found myself glued to the screen watching film footage of what it was like to work at one of the actual software companies who'd made some of the games I'd been playing. It was amazing just to see a ZX Spectrum on the television. I felt like I was now part of something that was not just happening in the playgrounds of the schools me and my mates went to. It was happening all over the United Kingdom. The computer craze I had found myself caught up in was spreading like wildfire. I knew who Ocean were, they had made some of my favourite games, and had also played a few of Imagine's games like '*Jumping Jack*', '*Zzoom*', '*Arcadia*' and '*Pedro*'. Unfortunately for the staff at Imagine the film crew arrived just days before the company went bust and were there to record the bailiffs take over the building just as the staff had popped out on their lunch break. The documentary also showed how, at the opposite end of the scale, Ocean Software were going from strength to strength and were starting to enjoy the fruits of their success. Two new games that were not even out in the shops yet were featured in the programme - '*Hunchback II: Quasimodo's Revenge*' and '*Kong Strikes Back*' for the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad machines. These were the games planned by Ocean Software to be their biggest sellers during the Christmas period that year so both had to be good. The titles had been glimpsed in various sections of '*Commercial Breaks*' as the staff at Ocean Software were shown discussing ideas for the games, testing early versions and once finished, showing both games off to a school's computer club. The children were then asked for any constructive criticism so that any last-minute improvements could be made before the titles were duplicated and distributed via a cool looking blue Ocean Software van, shown leaving the car park behind the Ocean building in Manchester. I had been wholly fascinated by it all and wished I had been quick enough to have recorded the programme on to VHS tape as I really wanted to watch it again. I raved about the programme the next day at school but most of my mates had managed to miss it so did not really have a clue what I was banging on about.

It was only a few days later when Rennie arrived at Mr. Heathcote's English lesson, the first one of the day, where we always sat next to each other. As the teacher started his lesson Rennie produced two tape cases out of his blazer pocket and pushed them sideways across the desk towards me. Straight away I recognised the black, blue, red and white of the Ocean Software inlays. He had bought '*Hunchback II: Quasimodo's Revenge*' and '*Kong Strikes Back*'. "Wow. When did you get these?!" I asked as quietly as I could. I turned them both over as I wanted to see the cover artwork. I tried desperately hard not to make a noise with them in case I ended up alerting the teacher. Last thing I wanted was for him to realise neither of us was paying any attention and then come and confiscate Rennie's new games. "Last night after school", he whispered, "You can borrow them during dinner if you want." "Cheers matey. Thanks", I said. So, just after the bell had been rung signifying the start of lunchtime Rennie handed me the two games. I went home and ran off a tape-to-tape copy of both titles as they both used the '*Speedlock Protection System*' so there was no way I could use a copier program. I had a quick check to make sure they worked and returned to school for the afternoon, handing them back to Rennie in the next lesson. I was now able to play the games I had seen on the documentary at home on my own Spectrum in the comfort of my own bedroom.

As Christmas morning in 1984 arrived I was up early, as were my sisters, to open our presents and see what Mum and Dad had bought for us. I had asked for and got '*Blue Max*' by U.S.Gold - another game

where, I soon realised, I had been taken in/duped by the cover artwork. I hadn't read a review or seen a single screenshot from the game until I loaded it up on Christmas morning. I can't think now for the life of me why I wanted it. 'Crash' were late with this one, not reviewing it until the March 1985 edition where it was awarded an okay 78%. I think I enjoyed unwrapping 'Blue Max' and wondering what it was going to be like more than the actual playing of the game itself. It really wasn't anything amazing. Still, it had another great D.F. Thorpe loading screen to gawp at while I waited for it to load. I also received a 'Quickshot II' joystick along with a programmable Dk'Tronics interface which was needed in order for me to be able to plug a joystick in to the computer. The ZX Spectrum, as it came out the box, didn't have a joystick port already included necessitating the need to buy an add-on peripheral. I did find that, in general, I preferred to use keys when playing Spectrum games. I just couldn't get the same amount of accuracy when using a joystick that I could achieve by using the keyboard. The joystick itself had to be stuck on to a table using the four plastic suckers underneath. So, while the joystick remained connected to my computer I still found myself using the old familiar Q, A, O, P and SPACE for games that allowed you to redefine the keys for Up, Down, Left, Right and Fire. Why anyone would ever want to use any other combination of keys was, and still is, beyond me. Later on, I discovered the 'Konix Speedking' joystick. It had microswitches, unlike my previous model that had cheaper leaf switches. Microswitches made a satisfying 'click' when you moved the stick. I got on much better with the 'Speedking' than I had with the 'Quickshot II' as it was designed to be held in your hand and it was moulded so that it would feel comfortable doing so. I'd had enough of having to stick a joystick on to a table with rubber suckers!

ZX Spectrum software bought in 1984:

(Title, label, price paid, date of purchase (if known), 'Crash' issue number & date - overall score gained)

1. **'Trashman'** by New Generation Software, £7.95 from NHCC, Tuesday 12 June, issue 04, May 1984 – 83%.
2. **'Mrs Mopp'** by Computasolve, £5.95 from NHCC, Tuesday 12 June, issue 01, February 1984 – 69%.
3. **'Fahrenheit 3000'** by Firebird, £2.50 from NHCC, Saturday 18 May, issue 13, February 1985 – 81%.
4. **'Percy the Potty Pigeon'** by Gremlin Graphics, £6.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 13, February 1985 – 81%.
5. **'Booty'** by Firebird, £2.50 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 10, November 1984 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
6. **'Exodus'** by Firebird, £2.50 from NHCC (receipt lost), no *Crash* review.
7. **'Short's Fuse'** by Firebird, £2.50 from NHCC (receipt lost), no *Crash* review.
8. **'Mr. Freeze'** by Firebird, £2.50 from NHCC (receipt lost), no *Crash* review.
9. **'Blue Max'** by U.S.Gold, £7.95 (bought by my parents as a Christmas gift), issue 14, March 1985 – 78%

Full price releases = 4
Budget releases = 5
Total purchased = 9
Total spent = £33.35

Evidently having a paper round as my only source of income didn't bring in much disposable cash. I still wasn't able to buy as many original computer games as I would have liked on the £3.50 a week wage I was getting. Only three full price titles were bought in the seven months since acquiring my Spectrum and the first two of those were from money I had received for my fourteenth birthday (and were discussed earlier). This was all I could afford, for now.

'Percy the Potty Pigeon' had been bought blind and I wasn't enamoured with my off the cuff choice. It wasn't a great game by any means. I had just been attracted to it by its cover art. Again!

I had read the review of Firebird's 'Booty' in issue 10 of 'Crash' from November 1984 and the game had been the first ever budget title to receive the coveted *Crash Smash* award. I recall being sat on the sofa at Lutterworth Road on the afternoon of Saturday 27 October, there was sport on the television and I was bored and really wanted to go out and buy 'Booty'. No one had ever been able to buy a *Crash Smash* before for just £2.50! I asked my Dad for the coinage but he said "No" straight away and no amount of

badgering by me got him to change his mind so I went in a right sulk. I would have to wait until I'd been paid enough to get it for myself. *'Booty'* and the other budget games in the same series, published on the Firebird Silver label, all had an actual screenshot from the game on the sleeve. Not many publishers were that honest with you at the time. Being able to see what the game's graphics were like before purchase meant that the potential buyer had a good idea of what they were buying before stumping up the cash. Firebird was a new label set up in 1984 and was the computer software division of British Telecommunications company British Telecom. Mastertronic was one of the few companies releasing budget games at the time and had started doing so in 1983, way before Firebird. During this early period Mastertronic's games nearly always received negative reviews in the magazines so budget releases had a bit of a dirty reputation at this point in time. I wasn't tempted to buy any of Mastertronic's games yet as the scores they were getting when reviewed were nowhere near good enough for me to even contemplate it, yet. This resulted in me and my mates referring to the company as *Masterchronic* for a laugh. That would all change very soon when the quality of their releases started to improve and other publishers entered the market and upped the competition.

'Exodus' and *'Short's Fuse'* were bought because they were the best-looking games in the next batch of games to be released in the same series as *'Booty'*. Neither were as good as that title, but I felt I got my £2.50 worth out of each and all three looked good sat next to each other on my shelf.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1984:

Jackie Wilson – 21 January.

Marvin Gaye – 1 April.

Tommy Cooper – 15 April.

Eric Morecambe – 28 May.

Diana Dors – 4 May.

James Mason – 27 July.

Chapter 7: 1985

“Chuffed I had got this exclusive game that I had never seen for sale in any shops.”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'The Breakfast Club' – John Hughes, 15 February.
- 'Back to the Future' – Robert Zemeckis, 3 July.
- 'Day of the Dead' – George A. Romero, 19 July.
- 'Come and See' – Elem Klimov, July.
- 'Pee-wee's Big Adventure' – Tim Burton, 9 August.
- 'Re-Animator' – Stuart Gordon, 18 October.
- 'Beverly Hills Cop' – Martin Brest, 5 December.
- 'Legend' – Ridley Scott, 13 December.

Throughout the year I became even more interested in the ZX Spectrum scene and the hundreds of software titles available for it. Almost every game that I had seen in *'Crash'* and the other magazines that I wanted to play I was able to get for my own collection, either by getting a copy from someone I knew or, when it was a game that I was specifically interested in, bought myself. It was around this time I started to up my dabbling in producing my own computer graphics on the ZX Spectrum screen. After all, home computers weren't just made to play games on. They did have other uses. There was software available for home accounts, cataloguing collections, educational purposes, train spotters and packages that would enable you to make your graphics. At first, I learned how to use a pirate copy of *'Melbourne Draw'* by Melbourne House, which I had got on the first pirated tapes school mates had made for me and experimented with simple black and white line drawings. Three years earlier I had bought a comic by Quality Communications Ltd called *'Halls of Horror Special 1982'* and in it was a story called *'The Lair of the Dragon'*. The tale was all about a 12th century not-so-crusading knight who heard whispers in a public house about a fair maiden called Lady Melissa. She was offering her hand in marriage to anyone male who could slay a dragon. The beast was making a nuisance of itself in her kingdom and she needed it gone. The knight then set out on a quest to try and successfully kill the beast himself. After discovering that the dragon was actually real and not a figment of someone's overactive imagination, he commences battle with it and, eventually, overpowers the monster and chops its head clean off. He presents the severed trophy to Lady Melissa, by which time, it had transformed into that of her own brother. The real nature of the beast all none too apparent to our hapless knight. As the hero lays claim to his prize Lady Melissa turns into a dragon herself and splits open the knight and chomps on his innards, much to my delight. I had read this tale many times and wanted to try and produce a ZX Spectrum version of the whole story. The strip was black and white which meant I wouldn't have to start messing about with any colour, something I had yet to get the hang of. I got as far as three screens worth and then gave up. It was taking much longer than I thought transferring the images from paper on to the computer screen. Still, I had learned that making ZX Spectrum graphics wasn't something that could be done quickly. A good few practice screens later I had found it was easier than I had anticipated to get something looking semi-decent.

It was to be a good few months though before I tackled anything that had any colour in it. Working out how to handle the dreaded 'attribute clash' problems that only allowed you to use two colours in any 8x8 character square wasn't an easy thing to get my head around at first. How could anything not look blocky when you're got those restrictions? It was obviously possible as some of the loading screens I'd admired previous to this were works of art. The authors of those had managed to get round the attribute issue so it wasn't in the realms of impossibility.

I started to load my favourite commercial loading screens into *'Melbourne Draw'* and study them. I would take all the attributes off to see what the drawing itself looked like underneath before all the colour was added. By doing this I found out exactly how the talented authors I admired had constructed them. I learnt quite a lot through doing this and used the knowledge to further the quality of my own work though I still had a lot of practising to do before I could even hope to match the quality of my favourite commercial creations.

Both me and Hayden had now become firm fans of Quicksilver's games – *'3D Ant Attack'* had been heralded a classic, rightly so, and Hayden had bought their *'Fantastic Voyage'* and *'3D Ant Attack'*'s sequel *'Zombie Zombie'*. We both played this game a lot at Hayden's house at the weekends and enjoyed trying to get the zombies to follow the character you controlled up on to the walls so that character you controlled would

then jump off, the zombie would follow and land in a blobby, green squish as he hit the floor. We both found the music, which was probably the first time a ZX Spectrum game had featured this type of simulated two-channel tune, amazing. Not only had we not heard two-channel music on a Spectrum before the end-of-game tune was a damn fine composition in itself and had been composed by Sandy. The other tune, played over the game's menu, was a two-channel rendition of *'Ten Green Bottles'*. Every time we loaded *'Zombie Zombie'* we made sure that we had set up the tape player in order to amplify the sound coming out of the Spectrum by connecting just the microphone lead and pressing play on the player with no tape in it so we could up the volume and hear both tunes in all their glory.

On Saturday 5 January, after spending some free time out playing in the snow, we were both sat in the back room at Hayden's house playing *'Zombie Zombie'*. Mid-game Auntie Sue entered the room and said she needed to talk to me. Her voice sounded grave and serious as she spoke and I wondered what on earth was going on as it was obvious something was up. She went on to inform me that my Mum and sister, Leanne, had been in Northampton town centre that afternoon and both had been hit by a van on Abington Square. Upon hearing this news, I started to cry. She reassured me that they were both okay but were, at this moment, in hospital and that I should go home as soon as possible. It turned out that Leanne had broken her leg and would need it putting in a plaster. Further complications meant that she needed a metal plate attaching to her bone which she had to wear for ages. Mum got away with some bumps and bruises and felt hugely guilty for not walking the few yards up to the zebra crossing and walking across the road there instead. Ever since then whenever I hear the music from *'Zombie Zombie'* I'm reminded of Leanne and Mum being run over. It's funny how music can ingrain itself into your head and take you back to where you were when you first heard it years later. *'Crash'* had reviewed the game in the then current issue, number 10, but hadn't given it a *Smash* award. I actually thought that the game had improved on its predecessor and spent much more time on *'Zombie Zombie'* than I did on *'3D Ant Attack'*. I had been put off playing its prequel due to the huge number of keys I had to remember in order to play it. Obviously after listening to criticism of his previous title Sandy had simplified the controls for the sequel, thus making it a more enjoyable experience. The *'Crash'* review had awarded *'Zombie Zombie'* 84% for graphics and an overall score of 80%. I thought it had deserved more. Maybe I had just been swayed by the excellent music – *'3D Ant Attack'* had none – and having some nice tunes always did seem to make a game more enjoyable. But still, 80%?

While on half-term holiday from school on the morning of Tuesday 26 February 1985 I was flicking through the four television channels when I was surprised to hear ZX Spectrum data coming out of the speakers. I was tuned into Channel 4 and, as there wasn't any scheduled programme on at the time, had happened upon a transmission by the teletext information service (Channel 4 and ITV's service was called *'Oracle'*. The BBC's was *'Ceefax'*). I quickly ran upstairs to my bedroom, grabbed my tape recorder, power lead and a blank tape. I dashed back downstairs as fast as my legs would carry me, set it up, pressed record and held the recorder up to the TV speaker until the sounds had finished. I then set up my ZX Spectrum and, to my great surprise, the recordings were recognised by my computer and, once I had entered *'LOAD ""'* and pressed *'play'* on the recorder, started to load in. I didn't catch the start of the broadcast, so I had not got a clue back then what I'd missed but first on my tape, which took me by complete surprise, was a complete game. There wasn't a loading screen to gawp at while it loaded but there was a cryptic message about collecting puddings! Once loading was complete an Ocean Software logo appeared at the top of the screen and, after a few seconds wait, the words *'Pud Pud In Weird World'* appeared. Between the two words was a bizarre looking round flea like creature. A great synthesized version of Glen Miller's *'In The Mood'* then started to play and as the tune went on the border started to flash with different colour bars and the sound being emitted from the Spectrum beeper got very strange and seemed to be playing random notes whilst managing to stay in tune. It all sounded and looked very odd. What was even weirder was that if you listened to the music again the random section of it was completely different to the time before.

Once I'd got over the realisation that it looked like I'd been given a game for free without having to do anything illegal I remembered that this was the game I had seen being demonstrated in December of 1984 on the *'Commercial Breaks'* documentary that I had caught on television. Looking at the intro screen I could now put a name to the fellow I had seen demonstrating it. His name was Jonathan Smith and was known as *'Joffa Smiff'* in most of his games and I recognised the name from a few other good Ocean Software games I'd been playing previously. I had a few goes on *'Pud Pud In Weird World'* in which you had to guide the main character round a bizarre looking world full of giant cans of *'7 Urp'* drink, flowers and half eaten Spectrum keyboards and find and eat the missing puddings that were dotted around the landscape. You had to keep Pud Pud's energy up by eating the various creatures that were flying around the place, only some of them were poisonous and would deplete your energy rather than boost it should you choose to eat the wrong one. I thought the game was really good, especially as it hadn't cost me a

penny. The graphics and sound were great! Chuffed I had got this exclusive game that I had never seen for sale in any shops I loaded up *'The Key'* copying program and made myself a fresh, better quality copy just in case the poorly recorded version I'd got from the television speaker decided not to work again. The next day at school I eagerly told my ZX Spectrum owning mates about my acquisition and it turned out that no one else I knew had caught the transmission. I was able to dish out this unreleased and finished Ocean Software game to various school pals making me instantly, and momentarily, more popular than anyone else who owned a Spectrum.

A screen on the tape, which I was annoyed I hadn't kept track of and subsequently lost, was from Sinclair's never released fourth Horace game called *'Horace to the Rescue'*. That particular screen disappeared for years. Was I really the only person who managed to record this? Apparently not, as, thirty four years later in 2019, a tape containing a recording of the full broadcast was rescued from obscurity via eBay by a fellow called Steve Brown and salvaged. Once I'd been sent a copy I was able to sit down and go through the tape just as I did back in 1985 and discover the exact contents of the material that had been used in the broadcast, including all the stuff I'd missed. The broadcast was made in conjunction with a Channel 4 TV series called *'4 Computer Buffs'* that was broadcast each Monday (the day before) at 5:30pm. The full broadcast included the following:

1. Program: zxtune - A very short program. Upon running I have no idea what this is. An Azimuth tape head alignment program maybe?

2. Program: zxprog - Again, another very quick load. I have no idea what this does. When run it comes up with the 9 STOP statement, 201: 1 message. Nothing else.

3. Program: 3 - This is where I managed to start recording back in 1985 and we have the then unreleased Ocean Software game *'Pud Pud in Weird World'* by Joffa Smiff. It appears to be the full game and not just a demo. After the basic loader has loaded it displays the message:

"THE OBJECT OF PUD PUD IS TO FIND
AND EAT THE TEN PUDDINGS
SCATERED (sic) AROUND THE MAZE."

4. Program: 4 - This is the full 1984 game from Ocean Software *'Transversion'*, written by Christian Urquhart & Nick Pierpoint. Again, it appears to be the full version and, being a 16k game, loads in really quickly. I already had this in my collection of pirated games.

5. Program: Melbourne - This is a series of demos from company Melbourne House and starts off with a two-screen demo of *'Sir Lancelot'* written by Stephen Cargill for the 16k Spectrum and is fully playable. To load the next part, you are required to press the 'J' key then press play on the tape. If you start to load it from NEW then it crashes.

6. Program: demo - Once the basic loader has loaded in a message is displayed:

"The following title screens
are taken from a number of
forthcoming programs.

This special demonstration
tape, brought to you by
Melbourne House, ends with
an animated sequence from
the soon to be released
MUGSY'S REVENGE."

First up is a really nice loading screen to a game called *'Black Belt'*. I've never seen this documented anywhere before. Is this the original title for *'Way of the Exploding Fist'* or a completely different game that never came out? A mystery had presented itself to us. Next up is the in-game screen to the never released fourth Horace game *'Horace to the Rescue'*. Apparently, the author, William Tang, suffered a collapsed lung while writing the game and it was never finished. In the screen you can see Horace and he is near three doors adorned with padlocks that require unlocking. Nearby is a swimming pool complete with diving

board. In the water is a key (for one or all of the locks) and a snorkel is also nearby which, I'm guessing, would be required to collect so that Horace doesn't drown while retrieving the key. Then we have the 'Gino's Pool Hall' demo sequence. In it you can see some shady characters playing a game of pool. Someone you can only see from behind takes an exceedingly good shot, pots two balls and then proceeds to get beaten black and blue as the blinds are then drawn to hide the violence from prying eyes.

7: Program: 4 Buffs - This starts off with an animated Spectrum version of the Channel 4 logo (complete with a beeper version of the tune) and is then followed by six pages of instructions on the two rolling demos Micromega supplied for the demo. Once you've read that you press 'x' to exit and the next demo is loaded in.

8: Program: A DAY - This a rolling demo of a game called 'A Day in The Life' written by Stephen J. Redman. In it you play Sir Clive Sinclair and it's a rather dated (for then) platform game. The rolling demo shows you the various screens contained in the game and at no point can you actually have a go even though it lets you re-define the keys or choose a joystick.

9: Program: JASPER - Another rolling demo that, amazingly, loads in as a turbo load. I really doubt my original copy of this actually worked considering how I recorded it. Even if it did, I didn't miss much as I already had the full version of 'Jasper' on pirate copy. Written by Derek Brewster, again, this is an unplayable rolling demo that shows the viewer some of the screens contained in the game. Thus, ended the broadcast. You can view this demo here: https://youtu.be/GnnFESA_raE

I never saw a new commercial copy of 'Pud Pud in Weird World' for sale in the shops anywhere. I didn't even know it had been officially released - it was only advertised a grand total of three times in a firework night themed Ocean advert along with 'Kong Strikes Back', 'Hunchback II' and the ill-fated 'Airwolf', a license Ocean had decided to advertise before the deal had been paid and signed off and which, inevitably, went to rival software house Elite Systems. The advert, which featured an illustration of the Houses of Parliament, was adorned with the tag line "Don't fool with fireworks when you can play with DYNAMITE". I did eventually manage to get myself an original copy of 'Pud Pud in Weird World'. I kept a regular eye on the window of John's Secondhand Shop on the Kettering Road. I would walk past it as I made my way from NHCC to Adrian Singh's house as the shop occasionally had Spectrum games for sale in the window. One day I saw that there was an original of 'Pud Pud in Weird World' for sale. It wouldn't have cost me any more than £2 so I went in and purchased it. That was the only copy I ever saw. Recently occasional copies have turned up on the internet for sale and you are looking at £30 plus if you want to bag one yourself. In 2016 a sealed copy sold for a whopping £65!

Issue 15 of 'Crash' from April 1985 hit the streets on Thursday 28 March. A look down the list of which games had been reviewed informed me they had at last reviewed Ultimate's new game 'Alien 8'. Almost on the same day word got out that a box had been seen in the shops. 'Crash' had, again, *Smashed* the game in a double page review. The graphics were awarded 98% and the game 95% overall. I looked again at the screens they had printed. It looked just like 'Knight Lore' but with the castle and Sabreman graphics replaced by a spaceship and robot graphics. I read the review and took note of some of the comments the reviewers had made:

"'Alien 8' looks like and plays like 'Knight Lore' but the game is a bit of an advancement over the former game."

"Many people will regard this game as only having a slight difference to 'Knight Lore'. I cannot agree. For a start the graphics are more imaginative and pleasing. There seems to be more structure to the game."

The review ended with:

"Agreement that this is a slightly better game in most respects than 'Knight Lore', and therefore generally excellent."

I'd played 'Knight Lore' to death. Now having seen what 'Alien 8' looked like running I couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. Everyone had been hoping that Ultimate would top the advancement that 'Knight Lore' had made, not repeat it, which is what it looked like to me and my ZX Spectrum owning mates. I was willing to give Ultimate the benefit of the doubt though and wait until I had managed to actually play the game. 'Crash' had stated it was better than 'Knight Lore'. They were usually right. Maybe the routines had been

streamlined a little bit? After all, *'Knight Lore'* did get a bit laborious to play when more than a few things started moving around the screen – the action slowed down to a snail's pace in places making it painful to move from one part of the screen to another. Maybe that had been sorted out? A few days later I found out for myself. Rennie had bought *'Alien 8'* and he lent me his original one school dinner time so that I could make myself a tape to tape copy. I couldn't use a copier program as it was another Ultimate release that used *'Speedlock'*.

Fortunately, being pressed for time as it took ten minutes to walk home from school which minuses twenty minutes out of the actual time I'd be at home for, the first copy I made once tested loaded in with no problems. Another well drawn and atmospheric loading screen accompanied *'Alien 8'* as the data squealed and screeched itself into the Spectrum. I had hoped there would be some extra surprises in the game. After all, Ultimate's inlays didn't exactly give a lot away. I had a few goes, had a good wander about, died a few times and came away with a feeling of "Is that it?" As far as I was concerned this was *'Knight Lore'* but with all the graphics redrawn to make another game. *'Crash'* had lied to me! Yes, there was a cute little sequence that appeared when the player had lost all their lives that showed your little robot going through *'RE-PROGRAMMING'* that consisted of him being hit with a mallet, walking stick and punch glove but was that it? Even the music Ultimate provided in their games was starting to sound old hat. Other companies were using simulated synthesiser or two-channel sound routines and Ultimate were still using the old Spectrum beeper. Then I thought "Well, maybe I haven't found all the new stuff Ultimate's included in *'Alien 8'*?" After all, I'd only had a few goes on it during my hour over dinner time. I had some further goes after school. I still didn't find anything else that really made me want to play the game again. I just felt like I was playing *'Knight Lore'*, albeit in a different skin. For the first time ever I'd been disappointed by a new Ultimate game.

A few months earlier, in October 1984, Sinclair had released an upgrade to the Spectrum keyboard and called it the ZX Spectrum+. The machine itself was exactly the same inside as the computer I owned but Sinclair had done away with the 'dead flesh' keyboard of the original Spectrum and this new one looked and felt a lot sturdier. I have no idea how I managed to find the money for it but I'm guessing Mum stepped in to help out. So at the beginning of May 1985 I packaged up my beloved rubber keyed ZX Spectrum computer and sent it away to the Sinclair offices in Camberley, Surrey, along with a cheque for £20 so that I could get my computer keyboard upgraded. I would have to wait at least two weeks, maybe more, for it to be returned and I found the wait almost unbearable. I didn't know what to do with myself as I was now used to spending my spare time using my computer. I was suffering withdrawal symptoms. I spent every evening going to bed hoping tomorrow would be the day my computer-free time would come to an end.

Every morning I'd wake up and be hoping the postman, out on his morning delivery which always came before I left for school, was carrying my new ZX Spectrum+. I'd eagerly look out the window to see him making his way down the street and became disheartened every time he walked past without delivering my computer back to me. I didn't realise at the time that the postman wouldn't be carrying my computer. It was too big for him to carry it in his sack. It would be delivered by a van after the postman had completed his rounds. Duh!

Being off school and still Spectrum-less on Saturday 11 May, I was spending a boring day at home with not much to do. In the afternoon I was, again, flicking through the television channels in the vain hope there'd be something interesting to watch. There wasn't. Saturday afternoon television in 1984 usually consisted of sport or old black and white movies from the 1930s. I left the television on the channel that was broadcasting a live football match between Bradford City and Lincoln City. I couldn't be less interested in football and I was just about to change channels when, at 15:40, something caught my eye. The stand of the football ground was on fire. At this stage it was just a small fire in the top right section. I carried on watching, I had never seen a real fire happening live on television before so I popped a video into the recorder and pressed record just as the commentator, John Helm, said:

"Now these are extraordinary scenes at Valley Parade. This is supposed to be a day of celebration. One hopes the stand doesn't burn down."

What followed were some of the most horrific scenes I had ever seen as the fire took hold of the stand with such ferocity that within four short minutes it was a burning inferno. As the fire grew larger by the second some of the spectators, most of whom had now spilled out on to the pitch, were still jumping around waving and singing football chants in front of the cameras. I couldn't believe they weren't trying to get away. The commentator, in shock at what was unfolding in front of his eyes, stated, as the flames roared around the now engulfed stand:

"And that is a catastrophic sight for Bradford City football club."

The horror unfolding before him was all too apparent in his voice. The whole stand was now alight and then I saw the burning people. Remember, this was a live broadcast! A poor man could be seen walking on to the pitch and he was on fire from head to toe and was immediately surrounded by football fans who wrenched him down on to the floor and were frantically trying to put out the flames. It was horrendous and I sat there horrified at what I was seeing. Fifty-six people lost their lives in those few short minutes. Later on, the fire was all over the news and was the main focus of the newspapers the next day. Mum and Dad soon returned home and I played them the video I had recorded. They watched in silence as they saw with their own eyes what had happened. I had been really shocked by what I had witnessed. That image of that burning man has stayed with me even up to now. Another terrible event had occurred that was added to my growing mental list. Those tragic events can be viewed here, should you wish to see how horrific it was for yourself: https://youtu.be/ctT8_LiD2cU

Eventually, of course, my new ZX Spectrum+ did arrive back at my house along with a receipt bearing the Sinclair logo and dated Thursday 16 May 1985. The wait was over and I eagerly unwrapped the box and re-set my computer back up in my bedroom. I was well impressed with the new keyboard and loved how my computer now looked. I didn't really miss the old rubber keys at all. I had no complaints and no, none of the keys fell out if I held the thing upside down - reportedly a common complaint with the new ZX Spectrum+ keyboards.

While working at Peachy Bros I got to know Nick Beadman, who I already knew a little through Rennie, who was already friends with him. Nick worked for the Co-Op itself so while we passed each other in the aisles we never actually worked together. Nick was in the year above me and Rennie at school, owned a ZX Spectrum in a snazzy Saga 1 Emperor keyboard and was the only person I knew to own, alongside his Spectrum, the newly released Atari 520ST computer along with a posh colour monitor. This was a 16-bit machine. We all still had our old 8-bit Spectrums. Nick also drove a motor bike. That made him look much more grown up than I was, even though in reality it was just a year. Like me, he also frequented NHCC and knew Graham and Ken and also Karl Morton and Conrad Bedford, the two new employees at NHCC. The shop had been getting busier and busier as more people acquired their own home computers and there was now too much going on for just Graham and Ken to cope with so they had taken on Karl and Conrad to help out.

As my ZX Spectrum knowledge increased I was, by now, becoming more aware of which software companies were the good ones and which ones were the crummy ones. I started to look out specifically for the new games released by the decent companies as, more often than not, I'd be in for a treat once I'd managed to get a copy. My pirate tape collection was growing by the week and were now filling up with some of the following titles, all of which I now own original copies of I hasten to add. As much as it pains me to admit to taking away revenue from these various software companies, I would never have been able to play most of these back then if had I not done what every school kid was doing at the time and made pirate copies of them. Here's some of my favourites that I played lots but didn't actually buy:

A'n'F – '*Jungle Fever*', '*Chuckie Egg*' and '*Chuckie Egg II (Choccy Egg)*'.

Beyond – '*Psytron*', '*Lord of Midnight*', '*Shadowfire*', '*Doomdark's Revenge*', '*Enigma Force*' and '*Sorderon's Shadow*'.

Bug-Byte – '*Styx*', '*The Birds and the Bees*', '*Manic Miner*', '*Antics*', '*Kung Fu*', '*Turmoil*' and '*Zoot*'.

Design Design – '*Dark Star*' and '*2112 AD*'.

Digital Integration – '*Fighter Pilot*', '*Night Gunner*' and '*Tomahawk*'.

DK'tronics – '*3D Tanx*', '*Spawn of Evil*', '*Hard Cheese*', '*Maziacs*', '*Speed Duel*', '*Zig Zag*', '*Jumbly*' and '*Popeye*'.

Durell – '*Harrier Attack*', '*Jungle Trouble*', '*Scuba Dive*', '*Combat Lynx*' and '*Saboteur*'.

The Edge – '*Psytraxx*', '*Star Bike*', '*Brian Bloodaxe*' and '*Fairlight*'.

Elite Systems – '*Kokotoni Wilf*', '*Airwolf*', '*Frank Bruno's Boxing*', '*Grand National*', '*Bomb Jack*' and '*Commando*'.

Gargoyle Games – '*Ad Astra*', '*Tir Na Nog*', '*Dun Darach*' and '*Marsport*'.

Gremlin Graphics – '*Wanted: Monty Mole*', '*Metabolis*', '*Monty on the Run*' and '*Rocky*'.

Hewson Consultants – '*3D Space Wars*', '*3D Seiddab Attack*', '*Legend of Avalon*', '*Technician Ted*' and '*Dragontorc*'.

Imagine Software – '*The Alchemist*', '*Arcadia*', '*Zip-Zap*', '*Zzoom*', '*Jumping Jack*', '*B.C. Bill*', '*Cosmic Cruiser*', '*Hyper Sports*', '*Mikie*', '*Yie Ar Kung Fu*' and '*Green Beret*'.

Incentive – '*Splat!*' and '*Moon Cresta*'.

Melbourne House – '*The Hobbit*', '*Penetrator*', '*Terror-Daktil 4D*', '*Mugsy*', '*Hellfire*', '*Sir Lancelot*', '*Sports Hero*', '*Sherlock*', '*Gyroscope*', '*Way of the Exploding Fist*' and '*Fighting Warrior*'.

Microsphere – 'The Train Game', 'Wheellie', 'Sky Ranger', 'Skool Daze' and 'Back to Skool'.
Micromega – 'Deathchase', 'Haunted Hedges', 'Codename MAT', 'Jasper!', 'Kentilla' and 'Full Throttle'.
Mikro-Gen – 'Mad Martha', 'Mad Martha II', 'Automania', 'Pyjamarama', 'Everyone's a Wally' and 'The Witch's Cauldron'.
New Generation Software – 'Corridors of Genon', 'Escape', 'Knot in 3D' and 'Travels with Trashman'.
Ocean Software – 'Armageddon', 'Cavelon', 'Mr. Wimpy', 'Gilligan's Gold', 'Pogo', 'Moon Alert', 'Hunchback', 'Kong', 'Transversion' and 'Daley Thompson's Decathlon'.
Odin Computer Graphics – 'Nodes of Yesod' and 'Robin of the Wood'.
Realtime Software – '3D Tank Duel' and '3D Starstrike'.
Sinclair Research – 'Space Raiders', 'Flight Simulation', 'Planetoids', 'Hungry Horace', 'The Ship of Doom', 'Horace Goes Skiing', 'Horace and the Spiders', 'Chequered Flag', 'Match Point' and 'Stop the Express'.
Software Projects – 'Manic Miner', 'Tribble Trouble', 'Jet Set Willy', 'Thrusta', 'Astronut' and 'Lode Runner'.
Quicksilva – 'Meteor Storm', 'Mined Out', 'Timegate', 'Aquaplane', 'Bugaboo the Flea', 'The Snowman', '3D Ant Attack', 'Fred', 'Strontium Dog: The Killing', 'Zombie Zombie', 'Fantastic Voyage' and 'Mighty Magus'.
U.S.Gold – 'Spy Hunter', 'Beach Head' and 'Tapper'.
Ultimate Play the Game – 'Cookie', 'Tranz AM', 'Pssst', 'Jet Pac', 'Sabre Wulf', 'Knight Lore', 'Underwulde', 'Alien 8' and 'Night Shade'.
Vortex Software – 'Android II', 'TLL', 'Cyclone' and 'Highway Encounter'.

There'd also be companies who would only release one really good game, or others I'd only be able to get my hands on one title and that would be the only game by them that I'd ever play. Titles like 'Escape from Krakatoa' by Abbex, 'Skull' by The Games Machine, 'Strangeloop' by Virgin, 'Boulderdash' by First Star/Front Runner, 'Gulpman' by Campbell Systems, 'Pinball Wizard' by CP Software, 'Kosmic Kanga' by Micromania and 'The Oracle's Cave' by Doric would all form part of my first gaming experiences with my ZX Spectrum. As I said, had I not been able to make and play pirated copies of these games I would not have purchased them legitimately. I just didn't have the funds to pay for them nor was I enough of a fan of the games to want to get my own original copy. I would have just done without them and those titles would not have formed part of my early games playing history. I never really had more than a fiver on me let alone ten pence short of twenty quid going spare which I would have needed in order to buy Ultimate's 'Knight Lore' & 'Underwulde', for example.

Had copying a game from one tape on to another one been trickier to do then I guess that me and my mates would have lent more games to each other – "I'll have this game of yours for a week while you borrow this other game of mine for a week". As long as you had a good tape to tape set up at home then the lending of games to each other just wasn't necessary. I would read about these estimates in the computer press about the thousands of pounds the software producers were losing due to kids copying games but I just didn't really fall for it. For example, I had 'Sherlock' by Melbourne House on a pirate tape. The title retailed at £14.95 in the shops. Yes, I had a few goes on it and probably gave it out to a few of my other friends as well. But there was no way that Melbourne House could then say that they'd lost £14.95 because of that. Had I not been able to copy the game I just would never have played it. I can say that about a whole heap of games I had in my collection. In the end I don't think kids swapping a few games amongst themselves did any real harm to the industry. I'm sure many more kids got their parents to buy them a computer as a birthday or Christmas present just because they knew it was possible to get games for it by only spending a few quid on some blank tapes. Had that not been possible then I think they'd have been a good chance that less computers would have been sold.

Liverpool's Imagine Software, who had recently gone bust near the end of 1984, had been brought back to life by Ocean Software. Bosses David Ward and Jon Woods had stumped up a wodge of cash and bought the brand name. They were now starting to release some great new games under the label that had the added bonus of classic Bob Wakelin artwork. The new titles also sported some really great looking loading screens, mostly by the now highly venerated D.F. Thorpe. The first of the Ocean-era Imagine titles, 'World Series Baseball', earned itself a *Crash Smash* in issue 38 from May 1985 and had been awarded an overall score of 91%. The other new titles that followed the company's initial release all ended up being received favourably in the pages of 'Crash':

'Hyper Sports' – Issue 19, August 1985 – *Crash Smash* – 92%
 'World Series Basketball' – Issue 23, December 1985 – 81%
 'Mikie' – Issue 25, February 1986 – *Crash Smash* – 93%
 'Yie Ar Kung Fu' – Issue 25, February 1986 – *Crash Smash* – 92%
 'Green Beret' – Issue 28, May 1986 – 88%
 'Ping Pong' – Issue 28, May 1986 – *Crash Smash* – 90%

Again, 'Crash' made me start to realise that I didn't always agree with their ratings. How did 'Ping Pong' get a *Crash Smash* and 'Green Beret' didn't? In hindsight I think the latter game is the better of the two. All these titles had also garnered similar high scores in most of the other computer magazines. The Ocean Software owned Imagine were certainly doing well and releasing top end titles that were highly thought of by my co-Spectrum owning mates. Imagine Software was now a name to watch out for again.

Nick had stumped up the £39.95 purchase price, through a mail order advert, for an 'Interface III', a new plug-in device for the Spectrum and produced by Evesham Micro Centre. The device would allow you to copy a game from the memory of the computer to a new tape. The saved data would then load completely independently of the interface. That meant anything that was proving hard to copy, like a hyperload or 'Speedlock' protected game could easily be dumped on to a fresh tape and would then load at a normal speed. Computer shops and games publishers hated it. NHCC flatly refused to stock the 'Interface III' due to the ease with which you could use it to commit software piracy. The shop even refused to order one in as a customer order, which you could usually do if you wanted to buy something they didn't have in stock. Evesham got away with the 'Interface III' by stating on the advert that it would help users to copy games to Microdrive, something that users of that device were always griping about. Software companies did not make it easy for Microdrive owners to get their software on to the devices so that they would load up in a fraction of the time a tape version would. The 'Interface III' allowed anyone to do this but also had an option to save to a cassette tape. It made copying a game as easy as pushing the red button on top of the box and pressing record on a blank tape. If the game loaded into the ZX Spectrum anyone who had an 'Interface III' could make a fresh copy. The user then had to load in a specially written program that came with the interface, load in the data saved and then save off yet another working, independent copy of the game. It was like an early version of the 'Multiface' by Romantic Robot but that particular add-on cut out the middle step so made the whole process much quicker. On the 'Multiface' once you had pressed the red button all you had to do was to press record on your tape player and save the working copy to a blank tape. At this point in time though the 'Multiface' didn't exist, that was still a few months off coming out in 1986, and the 'Interface III' was the only add on that would enable ZX Spectrum owners to do this.

Conrad Bedford worked, at first, solely serving the customers in the NHCC. He would later also take on the responsibility of the Comtec Systems mail order side of the operation. That part of the business had to have a different name to the shop so that customers wouldn't walk in off the street then demand the, sometimes heavily discounted, mail order prices there and then as the item they wanted was sat on the shelf in front of them for the full retail price. Had you been a customer at NHCC at this time then Conrad would have been the person most likely to serve you. Karl and Conrad soon became part of my main social circle of friends and would both come out with us all on most Saturday nights for the next few years.

Ken and Karl's main job roles at NHCC was to fix the faulty machines that people would bring into the shop. Karl did spend some time serving customers and ringing purchases through on the tills too but was, in the main, down in the cellar of the shop attached to a hot soldering iron. People's computers were now suffering the ravages of being used and manhandled and were starting to break down. Someone had to be able to dismantle each machine, discover the fault, fix then soak test the computers so that they could be handed back, working like new, to the now happy owner. Should a customer be in a hurry to get their equipment back an 'Express Repair' could be requested for an extra tenner that would put their poorly piece of computer hardware on the top of the 'to be fixed' pile, providing there were no other 'Express Repairs' outstanding. Most of the dead Spectrums were the result of joystick interfaces being plugged in or pulled out while the power was still going to the machine. Interface damage would result in blown chips and a jumbled mess on the television screen upon power up that would render the computer completely unusable.

Other well-known computer faults included games crashing after the machine had been running for a while. This was usually due to faulty chips that, upon reaching a certain temperature, caused the computer to misbehave and crash. Dodgy power supply leads were another common problem. After a while a ZX Spectrum could reset with just the slightest of movement if the lead carrying the power to the machine was damaged. Sometimes even just breathing near the lead could cause the computer to crash. As most ZX Spectrum users still had a rubber key version the only way to reset those machines was to physically pull the power lead out of the back and put it back in again. Due to the wear and tear at the point on the lead where the user had been constantly grabbing at it and pulling it out, this is where most of the damage occurred. The PSU would be dismantled and a brand-new power lead attached. Hey presto! Just like new.

I was now making at least three trips to NHCC every week, maybe more. On occasion my school mates would walk into town after school then get the bus home from Northampton Bus Station and a stop off would occur at NHCC on the way down. I would sometimes join my friends for the walk into town and,

once they'd had a nose in the shop to see if anything new of note was sitting on the shelves, they'd leave me at NHCC and make their way to their respective bus stops. I would hang around in the shop for a while longer and have another good look at the stock on the shelves and it wasn't long before I was on first name terms with all the staff. If anything, new, that was particularly good, or that I had been asking about previously, had arrived in the shop that day, Conrad would let me know and load it up for me to have a look at.

During an after-school walk into town one day after with Nick he wanted to pop into the amusement arcade in Fish Street to show me a new game he'd been harking on about. As we entered the arcade there was a huge machine set up right near the entrance. It was the one Nick wanted to play. The game was called '*I, Robot*' by Atari and had been released in June 1984. He put his money in the machine and I stood behind him watching the screen. To say I was astounded is an understatement, I had never seen anything like it. '*I, Robot*' looked so futuristic. The game featured all these 3D polygon graphics with flat shading flying about the screen smoother than any game I had seen before. It made my ZX Spectrum at home look absolutely prehistoric. I didn't have a go on the game. '*I, Robot*' looked way too complicated and to have a game on it cost fifty pence a turn. I couldn't afford to spend that on one, most probably short, go. I didn't walk around with spare fifty pence pieces on me. At this time most arcade games still only cost between ten and twenty pence to play so this one cost more than double. I was well impressed with what I saw though. It left a huge impression on me. '*I, Robot*' was very much ahead of its time and still looks weird and wonderful now, over thirty years later. Though now I can play it in the comfort of my own home, via the excellent MAME (Multi Arcade Machine Emulator) and a quick and illegal rom download, for free! If you've not seen it before take a look: <https://youtu.be/EHkwdvfXHJc>

Back at home I couldn't get '*I, Robot*' out of my head. A few days later I sat down at my ZX Spectrum with a copy of Sinclair's '*VU-3D*' program. This package allowed the user to create a 3D wire frame shape, spin it round to any angle then fill it in with mathematically created shading. I had messed around with it before so knew how to use it but hadn't created anything worth keeping. In '*VU-3D*' I created a wire frame human head then set it to shade and saved it off as a screen. I completed this eleven times in total, each time with the head at a slightly different angle. Each screen took a few minutes to render so it took quite a while to get all the frames saved. Once I had my set of eleven screens I loaded them into a program called '*Screen Scrunger*' that I'd typed in from issue 13, from April 1985, of '*Your Spectrum*' magazine. This allowed me to compress a ZX Spectrum screen graphic then call it to the display with a 'Randomize User' command. I wrote a little program that would load in all eleven compressed screens then display them one after another to form a simple animation. The first time I typed 'Run' and saw my 3D head turning from left to right I was amazed. I had created something that actually looked really good. It was just a demo though and couldn't be used in a real game as the whole program practically filled up most of the computer's memory. Still, it looked mightily impressive for an 8-bit ZX Spectrum. You can see it loading in and running online here: <https://youtu.be/jmB1Hhr-z5M>

A school trip to Alton Towers occurred on Wednesday 10 July 1985. A whole load of rowdy teenagers from NSB descended on the theme park for a day of fun, thrills and, in some cases, being sick from overdoing it on the rides. While we were there film crews just so happened to be filming musical inserts for a Bob Carolgees children's television show called '*Hold Tight!*' which ran from 1982 to 1987. In the show two teams of school children compete each week on a giant Snakes and Ladders board for the prizes of free rides on the attractions. Nick Heyward was filmed standing at a huge fountain miming to '*Wonderful Day*', a song I thought was really boring and repetitive. A search of the internet brings up nothing about this particular tune but a YouTube comment on the video states that this song was supposed to be the follow up to previous single '*Laura*' but never came out. I guess the record company realised how naff a song it actually was and changed their minds about releasing it. More excitement was to come when we spied Madness setting up to record a clip for themselves. Unfortunately, it was another awful song called '*Yesterday's Men*' – a slow one with lots of saxophone in it. I think maybe they were trying a 'new direction' because it was nothing like their older stuff that had got into the charts. "I've never heard of it" I hear you say! Nor would I have had I not stumbled across them at Alton Towers that day. It peaked at number 18 in the charts and never gets played on the radio anymore. At the time of writing these are still up on YouTube. Nick Heyward can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/uU-MgHuCdtM> and the Madness song here: <https://youtu.be/oeTpTH8vf9c> (see if you can spot me at the back in my white and blue jumper, not swaying!)

On Thursday 29 August edition 20 of '*Crash*', from September 1985, officially hit the newsagents. For this issue Level 9's text and graphics adventure '*Red Moon*' featured on Oli's excellent cover illustration. There, on page 61, was the first advert for another new game from Ultimate Play the Game called '*Night Shade*'. It featured a suitably spooky looking tavern with all sorts of grotesque looking faces upon its outer walls. Outside it sat a green dragon, tied up by its owner who was obviously inside enjoying some form of

liquid refreshment. A pile of skulls, shields and swords lay above the tavern along with the obligatory spooky looking logo forming the game's title. All this was encased within an ornate border, which was now a trademark of all Ultimate's recent artwork. I really liked the cover art for *'Night Shade'* and it was probably my most favourite of their designs so far. After the disappointment of *'Alien 8'* I looked forward, again, to seeing this new Ultimate game and really hoped they had produced something groundbreaking to make up for the disappointment I felt with *'Alien 8'* that would set us all talking as they had done previously with *'Knight Lore'*. A few weeks later I was home alone when Nick turned up at my house on his motor bike and had in his hands a copy of *'Night Shade'* that he'd just bought from NHCC. I was already playing on my ZX Spectrum when he arrived, so I quickly reset my machine and loaded up Nick's new acquisition. Straight away I was surprised to see that Ultimate had gone back to using the normal Spectrum loader. There was no hyperload or *'Speedlock'* on *'Night Shade'*. Why was this? Nick had brought with him his *'Interface III'* in order to make a copy for me but it we wouldn't be needing it. This could be copied using the ancient *'The Key'* copying program. Maybe Ultimate had seen an increase in returns with their previous three titles that had all used the *'Speedlock'* loading system so had gone back to using the slower standard loader for their new game. As *'Night Shade'* finished loading we started the game were amazed to see that the game not only featured the same graphical viewpoint as *'Knight Lore'* and *'Alien 8'* but, and this was the advancement, it now scrolled and quite smoothly at that. The previous titles had both been flick screen games. Now, instead of the player moving around the screen, everything was moving smoothly around the player who stayed firmly in the centre of the screen. So, first impressions were good. Scrolling a 3D area around a ZX Spectrum screen of this size had not been done this well before. Once we had got over the pretty scrolling me and Nick set about trying to work out what in the hell we were supposed to do as the instructions on the inlay, as per usual, didn't give much away. After twenty or so minutes walking about and trying different things not much else appeared to be happening. On occasion the screen would look rather empty because, as you entered a building, the walls would be illustrated by just a line on the floor. Leaving the walls in would have resulted in the main character being hidden from view. Some of the baddies looked good though. There was a great monster wandering around with his arms held up above his head as if trying to scare the player. There were several different weapons you could collect that would fire a different object. We worked out that picking up each individual weapon would only give you a few to use so it wasn't advisable to be too trigger happy - as the weaponry soon depleted leaving you unable to shoot at anything at all. At least *'Night Shade'* was a bit more colourful than *'Knight Lore'* and *'Alien 8'*. Those games had just one colour per room to avoid any colour clash. The walls in *'Night Shade'* were different colours which looked better but did lead to a bit of colour clash. Nothing too noticeable though. After more goes it became evident that there really wasn't much to do. All that the game required was for you to find a certain weapon then find one of four main baddies and kill him with the corresponding weapon. That was it. *'Night Shade'* got boring quickly. The redemption I had hoped for was nowhere to be seen. Once the novelty of the scrolling 3D landscape had worn off there really wasn't much of a game to get your teeth into. The only other thing of note was that the inlay bore the first mention anywhere of a company I had never heard of before, Rare Ltd.

Meanwhile I was still plodding along at NSB and the teachers were starting to nag us all about the upcoming exams we would have to face next year and how important they were. My diary records my current timetable:

School timetable 1985-86

| Hours - Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|---------------------|
| 09:05 Geography | Comp'Studies | P.E* | Physics | English |
| 10:10 Physics | Maths | Geography | Biology | Creative Activities |
| 11:25 BREAK -----> | | | | |
| 11:45 Art | P.D.* * | English | Comp'Studies | E.D.*** |
| 12:55 DINNER -----> | | | | |
| 14:20 E.D. | Art | Biology | Maths | P.E. |

Homework

STUFF THAT!

*P.E. = Physical Education

**P.D. = Personal Development

***E.D. = Engineering Drawing

By November 1985 I was unhappy at having no money of my own so started to look for another job. I wanted to be able to buy my own games and having no income obviously made it impossible. I didn't have to look far or for long though as a five-minute walk from my house was a Co-Op store. I'd been going in with my Mum ever since I was born, and it had been there for as long as I could remember. We would pop in if we needed any bits when she was collecting us from Barry Road Lower School a few years back, the shop being just the other side of the road to the school itself. So, I went in, spoke to the manager and asked if there was any work available and while there were no vacancies in the main store there was one in the fruit and veg department which wasn't the Co-Op at all but a shop within a shop called Peachey Bros. I had a quick chat with the boss of that section and that was that. I had got myself a new job.

First though, as I was only 14 years old, I had to apply for an Employment Card via the Northamptonshire Education Committee. This was a legal requirement set out in the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 which ensured that I was only working the hours set out in the card and could not be forced to work longer hours which could have a detrimental effect on my schoolwork and general wellbeing. The Employment Card, dated 3 December 1985, stipulates that I could only work from 7:30 to 8:30 am every school day and 7:30 to 12:30 pm on Saturdays. It was illegal for me to deviate from these hours and I had to carry the card on me, "at all times when he or she is actually engaged in employment and must be produced on request to the Police or Education Welfare Officer". Very official. So now I had nearly doubled the hours I was working a week, thus doubling my wage. If I wanted to, I could buy a computer game every week on this money. I had to budget too now, as I had to factor in when the new issue of 'Crash' magazine was published. I *had* to have enough to buy it as soon as I saw it on the shelf. It would *not* do to see it there on a Wednesday, for example, and have to wait for payday on a Friday to be able to buy it. If that happened, then most of my school mates would have read it before me and that just would not do. I always made sure I had enough spare money for 'Crash' and knew exactly what date they had printed in the previous issue stating when the new one would be out in the shops so that I could start looking for it.

Just before Christmas of this year a new game was due to be released that had been heralded as some sort of new 'mega-game' in all the magazine previews, of which there had been plenty. The term 'mega-game' had been bandied about by the Liverpool incarnation of Imagine for their 'Bandersnatch' title which was never finished let alone ever released. This latest one was by a company called Mikro-Gen who had built up a solid reputation with their various Wally games – 'Automania', 'Pyjamarama', 'Everyone's A Wally' and 'Herbert's Dummy Run' had all been well received by the magazines and the games playing public. This new title of theirs was to use an add on interface that expanded the ZX Spectrum's internal memory to 64k and also contained a connection for a joystick. This interface was called the 'Mikro-Plus' and was also going to be used on the final Wally game 'Three Weeks in Paradise' – which was going to their next but one release. As well as expanding the memory of the ZX Spectrum the interface also made piracy impossible as you had to have a 'Mikro-Plus' interface plugged into your computer in order to get the game to run. Each interface would only run the game it came with as, contained on some of the chips inside it, was code specific to that game. It would be of no use to have a pirated copy of any 'Mikro-Plus' game on a tape as it was impossible to make a copy of the interface as well. Ingenious idea. Piracy, everyone thought, had at last been thwarted. The first game to feature this amazing new hardware add-on was to be an adventure called 'Shadow of the Unicorn'. I awaited a review with bated breath. Could we again be, possibly, about to witness the next stage in computer games entertainment? Were we about to be amazed at the advancement the interface gave the ZX Spectrum? Were we going to be dazzled as we had been during the early years of the ZX Spectrum all over again as we bore witness to the next stage in the development of computer games? I did wonder and hoped we were. 'Shadow of the Unicorn' hadn't turned up at NHCC yet and, while the interface and the company's plans for it had been previewed in the August 1985 edition of 'Crash', no one had yet seen any screenshots from it. What did it look like? Were the graphics going to blow us all away? I re-read the piece from 'Crash' and noticed that it said that Mikro-Gen's game based on the license for 'Battle of the Planets' would be the first game to use the 'Mikro-Plus' interface. So, what happened to that one I thought?

"Initially the system will be launched with two games, 'Battle of the Planets' and 'Shadow of the Unicorn'. Each one comes complete with cassette and the add-on, the add-on being specific to the individual game. 'Battle of the Planets' is a massive, superbly animated arcade shoot-'em-up split into three linked, but separate games. "I would feel happy selling each part of the game separately," Mike told us, "so all three together we see as a real blockbuster".

The second game, 'Shadow of the Unicorn' is a role playing adventure featuring ten individual characters whereas 'Everyone's a Wally' had only five. The game is so involved that a book is provided to set the scene for the game".

Obviously *'Battle of the Planets'* had been delayed and Mikro-Gen were now launching their snazzy new interface with a different game instead. I ventured to NHCC one day after school and the very first *'Mikro-Plus'* game *'Shadow of the Unicorn'* had turned up at last. I pawed the thick box it came in. Still no screenshots to be seen. There was only text on the back – I wanted to know what the game actually looked like. I noticed the hefty price tag - £14.95! Conrad saw me looking at it “Don't bother – it's crap!” he said. A feeling of déjà vu came over me as I recalled hearing almost exactly the same thing when I first saw *'Deus Ex Machina'* on the shelf near enough 12 months before. “So, what's wrong with it then?” I said, again. Conrad dug out the tape and interface for the game from the storage shelves behind the counter. He let me look at the interface which looked just like any other joystick interface but had *'MIKRO-Plus+*' embossed in white on the top. A white sticker had been stuck on the front of the interface with the name of the game on it. After all, if you had a few games that used the interface it wouldn't do to be getting them mixed up with each other. Also, in the box was a thick story book and a lovely looking map of the world the game was set in and was printed on papyrus-type paper to make it look a bit old. I liked these sorts of extras that came with games, they always helped with setting the atmosphere and were good to look at and read while you waited for the game to load. Conrad plugged the interface in to the back of the shop's ZX Spectrum. A menu appeared on screen as soon as you plugged the power lead in asking if you wanted to load the game in from tape, Microdrive or align the head on your tape recorder. I had never seen that before. He pressed play on the tape player and we waited patiently for it to load. I couldn't help but be a bit disappointed when it became evident that no one at Mikro-Gen had bothered to produce a loading screen for the game. I was now a big fan of good loading screens and was becoming better at making my own. To not see one on a game that cost £14.95 to buy made it feel a bit incomplete and unfinished. A good loading screen always helped set the scene and gave you something pretty to look at while you waited. After a few minutes, the game finally finished loading in. Another feeling of déjà vu prevailed as I saw the game running. It looked a bit like *'Lords of Midnight'* from 1984 only with poorly animated people walking around the landscape. I had a quick go. Each screen didn't look much different to the last. “Is that it?” I asked. “Looks like it”, Conrad replied. I breathed a sigh and, despite being disappointed at a finished product that I'd looked forward to seeing again, felt some consolation that at least I wouldn't be scrabbling around trying to find £14.95 to buy it. Just what was the extra memory needed for? It certainly wasn't evident by playing the game in the shop.

'Crash' reviewed *'Shadow of the Unicorn'* in their *'1985/1986 Christmas Special'*. It gained an overall mark of 7/10 (The new releases reviewed in the adventure section in *'Crash'* were marked differently compared to the rest of the titles in *'Crash'*. They were scored out of 10. Arcade games were awarded a percentage). Well, I thought, *'Crash'* didn't think much of it so I'm not missing out by not buying it. *'Sinclair User's'* review from their December 1985 issue awarded the game a *Classic* status with an overall mark of 5/5:

“We've given it a Classic after a bit of soul-searching - somehow you expect miracles just because there's some hardware hanging off the back of the Spectrum, and miracles you don't get. But the full quest, if you can fathom out what's going on, is obviously going to take a while to sort out, and the setting is atmospheric and intelligently worked out.”

Anyone reading that would surely think twice about forking out 5p short of £15 for the game? The magazine had given it full marks yet still managed to make some negative comments about it in their final round up. *'Your Sinclair'* gave *'Shadow of the Unicorn'* 7/10, the same as *'Crash'* had, in their first issue from January 1986. They ended their review with:

“There's a mountain more to this game - and many a player will spend happy hours wandering across the extra 16K's of peaks and deserts.”

An extra 16k of peaks and deserts? All deserts look the same! What a con! I didn't have a go on *'Shadow of the Unicorn'* again till the early 1990s when I managed to buy myself a cheap second-hand copy. It wasn't any better then – it was just boring. The copy the shop had in on its day of release sat on the shelf, as *'Deus Ex Machina'* had twelve months before, for weeks. Each day, as people picked it up, turned it over and read the back then put it back on the shelf, it became grubbier and dog eared until it was looking a little worse for wear. After a month or two the shop discounted it to half its original price when somebody then purchased the sorry looking box and a re-stock was out of the question.

Everyone soon forgot about *'Shadow of the Unicorn'*. Mikro-Gen, by all accounts, never recovered from the amount of capital they had invested in their new little box of tricks. *'Battle of the Planets'* came out just after Christmas with no interface in sight followed by *'Three Weeks in Paradise'* a few weeks later, again, with no interface. An expanded version of *'Three Weeks in Paradise'* was later released for the 128k

Spectrum that utilised some of the features that would have been included on the interface version, had that game been issued with one. *'Shadow of the Unicorn'* had been a huge commercial failure and an expensive mistake. Mikro-Gen released just three more titles – *'Equinox'* in the summer of 1986, *'Frost Byte'* at the end of the year and their final game *'Cop Out'* at the start of 1987. Not long after they were bought out by Creative Sparks Distribution who promptly went into receivership. Mikro-Gen's demise had been brought on prematurely by the failure of their *'Mikro-Plus'* interface. Another original software house had fallen foul of the changing times and their want to do something a bit different to what everyone else was at the time.

ZX Spectrum software bought in 1985:

(Title, label, price paid, date of purchase (if known), *'Crash'* issue number & date - overall score gained)

1. **'Flight from The Dark'** by Five Ways Software, £6.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), no *Crash* review.
2. **'Chiller'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 15 April 1985 – 42%.
3. **'The Wizard's Warrior'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), no *Crash* review.
4. **'Zaxxon'** by U.S.Gold, £7.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 14, March 1985 – 58%.
5. **'Finders Keepers'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), no *Crash* review.
6. **'The Empire Fights Back'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC, Thursday 30 May, no *Crash* review.
7. **'Loco-Motion'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 17, June 1985 – 81%.
8. **'Nonterraqueous'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from Boots, Friday 12 July, issue 17, June 1985 – 77%.
9. **'Give My Regards to Broad Street'** by Argus Press Software, £7.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 17, June 1985 – 81%.
10. **'Subsunk'** by Firebird, £2.50 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 18, July 1985 – 7.5/10.
11. **'Quackshot'** by Sparklers, £2.50 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 18, July 1985 – 86%.
12. **'Helichopper'** by Firebird, £2.50 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 18, July 1985 – 67%.
13. **'Cylu'** by Firebird, £2.50 from NHCC 16 August, issue 19, August 1985 – 79%.
14. **'Action Biker'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 19 August 1985 – 52%.
15. **'Jason's Gem'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), no reviews.
16. **'Jet Set Willy II'** by Software Projects, £6.95 from NHCC, (receipt lost), issue 19, August 1985 – 61%.
17. **'The NeverEnding Story'** by Ocean Software, £9.95 from Brian Mills Catalogue, Wednesday 25 September, issue 26, March 1986 – 7/10. (For some reason this game had been out for months before *'Crash'* decided to review it).
18. **'Metabolis'** by Gremlin Graphics, £6.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 20, September 1985 – 87%.
19. **'Roland's Rat Race'** by Ocean Software, £6.90 from Brian Mills Catalogue, issue 20, September 1985 – 66%.
20. **'Red Moon'** by Level 9, £6.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 20, September 1985 – 9/10.
21. **'St. Crippens'** by Sparklers, £1.99 from Boots (receipt lost), issue 20, September 1985 – 72%
22. **'Desert Burner'** by Sparklers, £1.99 from Boots (receipt lost), issue 20, September 1985 – 48%.

23. **'I, of the Mask'** by Electric Dreams, £7.95 from Boots, Monday 18 November, issue 23, December 1985 – *Crash Smash* 92%.
24. **'Gunfright'** by Ultimate, £9.95 from NHCC, Friday 13 December, issue 25, February 1986 – *Crash Smash* 92%.
25. **'Rasputin'** by Firebird, £7.95 from NHCC, Tuesday 24 December, issue 27, April 1986 – 79%. ('*Crash*' reviewed this game four whole months after it had been released for some unknown reason!)
26. **'Journey's End'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 23 December 1985 – 6/10.
27. **'Swords and Sorcery'** by PSS, £9.95 from NHCC, Saturday 28 December, issue 24, January 1986 – *Crash Smash* 9/10.
28. **'Chickin Chase'** by Firebird, £3.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 23, December 1985 – 79%.
29. **'Zoot'** by Bug-Byte, £2.50 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 23, December 1985 – 59%.
30. **'One Man and his Droid'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 23, December 1985 – 76%.
31. **'Spike'** by Firebird, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 23, December 1985 – 61%.
32. **'Rockman'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 24, Christmas Special 1985-86 – 69%.
33. **'Spellbound'** by Mastertronic, £2.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 24, Christmas Special 1985-86 – *Crash Smash* 95%.
34. **'Chimera'** by Firebird, £3.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 24, Christmas Special 1985-86 – 71%.
35. **'Wham! The Music Box'** by Melbourne House, £9.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 32, September 1986 ('*Crash*' only reviewed this when the 128k version was released near the end of the coming year) (no rating).

Full price releases = 13
 Budget releases = 22
 Total purchased = 35
 Total spent = £157.59

I purchased twelve full price titles this year, the change of job to the moccasin factory and then to the Co-Op, obviously affording me a little more money that could be spent on games. I still had to be thrifty though as the fifteen budget games I bought demonstrate.

'*Zaxxon*' was an instant regret. It was a poor conversion from the arcade original. Slow, jerky and not really fun to play at all. Truth be told, it was way too an ambitious game to try and convert to the ZX Spectrum and played like a heap of dog poop.

'*Rasputin*' had been purchased after me and all my ZX Spectrum owning school mates had bought issue one of '*Your Sinclair*' magazine that had, for the first time ever, a working demo of a game packaged up so that it looked like a game you'd buy in the shops, for free, complete with a box and a printed inlay. There was *major* excitement in the playground because of this. We'd all felt like we'd actually been given an actual game for nothing. The game demo was pretty good and had some spankily good graphics. It was only after buying the full price version that I realised how hard it was to actually play the thing. I didn't get any further than I did on the demo, so the purchase of the full game was somewhat made redundant by that.

'*Jet Set Willy II*' was bought without seeing any reviews and I, once I had loaded it up, instantly regretted buying it. I was expecting something new, improved and up to date. What did I get? An expanded version of '*Jet Set Willy*' with more, poorly designed, rooms, that's what! Whoop whoop! As things were moving so fast in respect to how games looked and played '*Jet Set Willy*' was looking a bit old hat by

August 1985. I'd played the first game to death over the previous year and did not want to have to play the same screens again in order to *try* and enjoy its follow up. The cassette quickly sat gathering dust.

'*The NeverEnding Story*' was a great looking adventure game. Even though it was supposed to be a bit easier to play than your standard adventure, as it was aimed at younger players, I still didn't get very far with it. This was the first time I had come across Simon Butler's name, the person responsible for the beautiful graphics in the game. It was easily the best-looking adventure that had yet graced the ZX Spectrum but the memory those graphics took up had taken precedent over memory that should have been used to make the adventure itself more involving. Its vocabulary was somewhat limited though one could argue that as it was based on a children's film then that's who the game was aimed at.

Another Ocean Software title, '*Roland's Rat Race*', was bought from a catalogue and I tried and tried to enjoy it but I just couldn't find any game in there, though it did come accompanied by another great F. D. Thorpe loading screen. I was somewhat confused though as the game had been written by Denton Designs who, according to the magazines, were already masters of the computer game. They were responsible for Beyond Software's '*Shadowfire*' and '*Enigma Force*' and, more recently, Ocean Software's '*Frankie Goes to Hollywood*' game based on the Liverpool band that were enjoying huge success at the time. These were highly complex and in-depth games. I couldn't work out why I wasn't finding '*Roland's Rat Race*' fun. It didn't take me long to reach the conclusion that it was actually a load of rubbish and it wasn't long before it sat there gathering dust on my shelf (next to '*Zaxxon*' and '*Jet Set Willy II*'). I soon sold it on so I could put the money towards other games. I also learnt that while Denton Designs did produce games that were heralded as 'state of the art' by magazine reviewers they also made some dodgy licensed games which is where they made their most money. An interview with Denton Designs printed in the '*Crash Christmas Special*' from 1986-87 revealed their frustration that their, by their own admittance, worst game – Ocean Software's '*Transformers*' license - was also their most successful title in regard to how many actual copies were bought by the games playing public:

"We got into to a bit of trouble with 'Transformers' with Ocean which we managed to do in the end — we were all under so much pressure. I designed it, so I take all the blame for it. It was the worst game Dentons ever did, and it was the biggest seller. That tells you a lot about the computer industry doesn't it?" - Steve Cain.

He's got a point there hasn't he?

I bought '*Desert Burner*' because I'd rather liked '*St. Crippens*' which was released in the same series. It was dire though. '*Desert Burner*' is a game where the player is riding a bike along a road dodging various obstacles. Since when do bike riders have to dodge trees growing at the side of the road? You have to jump over the top of the trees which is ridiculous! So that one soon sat gathering dust at the back of the games shelf! It wasn't just me that found it annoying though. The review in '*Crash*' also mentioned this idiocy and gave it a poor write up.

'*I, of the Mask*' by Sandy White looked astounding in its *Crash Smash* review. It reminded me a bit of '*I, Robot*', the Atari game I had been impressed by in the arcade earlier in the year. I had really liked Sandy's previous game, '*Zombie Zombie*' and, controversially maybe, enjoyed it more than his first game - the ground-breaking '*3D Ant Attack*' - which is heralded as one of the best early ZX Spectrum titles. I went to NHCC to see if they had got any copies of '*I, of the Mask*' in. Turned out they'd only ordered one copy and that had been sold earlier in the day so I went on the hunt to try and find somewhere else with a copy. Luckily Boots the Chemist had one in which I promptly purchased. Upon getting it home and loading it up I was hugely impressed by the graphics. It featured a huge solid 3D robot head spinning about looking really menacing but was disappointed there wasn't any music to be heard. The two-channel simulation in '*Zombie Zombie*' was one of the highlights of that game and Sandy's new game greeted me with nothing but silence. I did spend hours with '*I, of the Mask*' but, once the novelty of the fantastic graphics had worn off, which did take a while, I became aware there really wasn't much to the game itself.

'*Gunfricht*' was my very first Ultimate Play the Game purchase. I just so happened to be able to afford their releases as and when they came out just as the quality of their games started to nosedive. At the time we, as games players, weren't aware of what was going on behind the scenes at Ultimate and that the authors of their previous titles were now concentrating on working on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) console. New titles for the ZX Spectrum were now not the company's main priority. I thought '*Gunfricht*' was a bit of an improvement on their previous game '*Night Shade*'. There was a bit more to do with the addition of the shooting range sub game section but something was still missing. Even though the title was still *Smashed* in '*Crash*', it really wasn't really anything to get too excited about. Due to Ultimate's excellent reputation me and my mates, for a while anyway, thought it was us who were missing the point.

We were so used to Ultimate's games being brilliant it just didn't figure that it was their standards that were slipping and not our ability to struggle to work out what to do in the game in order to make it fun. Ultimate's inlays were still very vague. That led us to try and find out what else there was to do. I just ended up thinking "There must be something else but what is it?" After all, games were supposed to be fun to play. After a few hours of perseverance, it became apparent we weren't having much fun at all and neither was anyone else. Ultimate were no longer as mighty as they once were and, unbeknownst to us at the time, things were only going to get worse for Spectrum Ultimate fans.

'*Chimera*', released on Firebird's new Super Silver mid-budget label, was a '*Knight Lore*' type game and provided some enjoyment. The best part of it, for me anyway, was the excellent speech that spoke the title of the game at various different speeds. Some of the results were very creepy sounding indeed.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1985:

Wilfrid Brambell – 18 January.

Dandy Nichols – 6 February.

Margaret Hamilton – 16 May.

Rock Hudson – 2 October.

Yul Brynner – 10 October.

Ricky Wilson – 12 October.

Chapter 8: 1986

“..I was looking at my own work – in the pages of ‘Crash!’”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'The Hitcher' – Robert Harmon, 21 February.
- 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off' – John Hughes, 11 June.
- 'Aliens' – James Cameron, 18 July.
- 'Flight of the Navigator' – Randal Kleiser, 1 August.
- 'The Fly' – David Cronenberg, 15 August.
- 'Blue Velvet' – David Lynch, 19 September.
- 'From Beyond' – Stuart Gordon, 24 October.
- 'Labyrinth' – Jim Henson, 2 December.

After school on Tuesday January 28 I made my way up on to the Wellingborough Road and sat and waited in the local barbers for a haircut. I used to hate having a haircut. No one ever did it right. My hair was so thin anyway it could never be styled and I would start feeling anxious as the barber started cutting away, hoping that he wouldn't make me look like a complete idiot once he'd finished with the scissors. Invariably as soon as I got out the barber's I would mess my hair up as it was always brushed too neat and made me look dorky. It wouldn't do anything other than fly about in the slightest breeze. On the walk home I would catch glances in shop windows as I passed, conscious of what my new haircut looked like. The barber shop had a television in their premises for people to watch as they waited for their turn. This day it was tuned to BBC 1, it was five o'clock and on came 'John Craven's Newsround', presented that day by Roger Finn. Everyone there immediately saw the footage of the Space Shuttle Challenger blowing up 73 seconds into its tenth mission. That 'Newsround' broadcast was the first time the terrible news had been told to the UK public barely twenty-one minutes after it had actually happened. I was hoping that the astronauts would have escaped in their escape pod but it wasn't to be. It was particularly sad as the Space Shuttle was carrying the first woman civilian into space and I knew her family could see the destruction at first hand as they were filmed by the television cameras watching the launch in person. Another disaster witnessed! The next day's 'Newsround' is online here: <https://youtu.be/0PdIXW5hLAs>

Some Sunday afternoons I would venture up to Nick Beadman's house. He lived in the Delapre district of town not far from Delapre Park. I'd never been over to this part of town before, not having had any family or friends living there, so was in unfamiliar territory. I would ride up on my racer bike, having grown out of my Chopper, across the town centre and out through the other side to Parkfield Avenue where Nick lived with his Mum and Dad in a large semi-detached house. Nick was their only child, he had no brothers or sisters, so had the second biggest bedroom at the back of the house. Nick had his Atari 520ST computer and monitor set up alongside his ZX Spectrum on a desk in his room that looked out on to their long and well-kept garden with a garage/shed at the end, along with his own stack system stereo hi-fi. There were no net curtains up in his room and it would get stifflingly hot on a summer's day as the sun streamed in through the window. He had also had a monitor connected up to his ZX Spectrum so his display looked much better than any other I'd seen before due to its improved clarity. We would spend the afternoon going through the new games both of us had acquired the previous week and make copies for each other. Then we would talk, play games and read magazines while listening to the radio. Nick had amassed quite a few original games that were stored neatly in the drawers of his computer desk. Titles I remember him having bought included 'Highway Encounter' by Vortex, 'The Fourth Protocol' by Hutchinson Computer Publishing, a few Ultimate's up to and including 'Night Shade', 'Fairlight' and 'That's The Spirit' by The Edge, 'Tir Na Nog', 'Dun Darach' and 'Marsport' by Gargoyle Games, 'Juggernaut' by CRL, 'Southern Belle' by Hewson Consultants, 'Starion' by Melbourne House, 'Wizard's Lair' and 'Starquake' by Bubble Bus and 'Hyper Sports' by Imagine. He also had an original copy of 'The Pawn' for the Atari ST. This was, up to this point, one of the most complex type-in adventures that had ever been written. The descriptions that went with each of the many locations were so long and detailed that playing the game was literally like reading a book. 'The Pawn' also boasted some stunning graphical representations of most of the locations that really put the images we saw on the ZX Spectrum in adventure games like 'The Hobbit' and 'Red Moon' to shame. These looked like paintings compared to the images featured in those titles as the Atari ST, along with its improved resolution and choice of 512 colours, loaded each picture in from disc when required so that they didn't take up much of the computer's memory. It just wasn't practical to do that on the ZX

Spectrum due to the cassette tape storage medium and, even if it had, it didn't have the resolution or colours of the Atari ST. We still didn't play many games on it though. Nick only had a few as they were much more expensive to buy and there weren't many other people who also had one at the time for Nick to get any pirate copies off. 'The Pawn' had cost him £24.95, ten pounds more than the most expensive ZX Spectrum game, so he had to take even more care about which titles he bought. As far as I was concerned though if I couldn't play it at home in my own room I didn't really want to play it at all so the ZX Spectrum was still the main machine we used while at Nick's. Sometimes Rennie would walk over for an hour or so, bringing with him a bag full of games he had bought that week, as he lived closer to Nick than I did. Another friend from school, Adam Stevens, joined us on a couple of occasions but he was a BBC owner so he probably didn't accept the invitation to join us that often due to the fact that all we did was take the mickey out of his computer choice. Obviously, he thought the BBC was better than the Spectrum but he was outnumbered and the jibes about fat graphics and all BBC owners being posh would have ground him down somewhat. Thing is, Adam was rather posh. Usually though, on those Sunday afternoons, it was just me and Nick there. I'd stay till about seven o'clock and bike home so I could have my Sunday night bath, watch Esther Rantzen in 'That's Life' on the television and have an early night ready for school the next day.

While we're here let us have a look at who, in my circle of friends and acquaintances, had a computer and which model at home around 1984-1986:

School friends:

Adrian Singh: ZX Spectrum
Stephen Reynolds: ZX Spectrum
Nick Beadman: ZX Spectrum
Neil Anderson: ZX Spectrum
Paul Aspinal: ZX Spectrum
Paul McKay: ZX Spectrum
Richard Dovey: ZX Spectrum
Adam Stevens: BBC
Stephen Hanwell: ZX Spectrum
Pak Keung Wan: ZX Spectrum
Paul King: Vic 20
Neil Donaldson: ZX Spectrum
Gary White: ZX Spectrum
Thear Namruti: ZX Spectrum
Stuart Kennedy: BBC
Lee Plowman: Dragon 32

Relatives:

Hayden Andrews (cousin): ZX Spectrum
Uncle Gary: ZX Spectrum

Other friends:

Chris Herbert: ZX Spectrum
Mark Edwards: ZX Spectrum

The results:

1. ZX Spectrum – 80%
2. BBC – 10%
3. (Joint) Dragon 32 & Vic 20 – 5% each

As you can see, while the ZX Spectrum was by far the most popular micro, I didn't know a single person who owned a Commodore 64. The only people I knew of that used Commodore 64s were a group of friends that Adrian had who attended the same school as him, Trinity Upper School. Adrian would sometimes get to borrow a Commodore 64 when one of his friends went on holiday for a week (handing it over to look after as you would a pet?)

On Friday 31 January I didn't go to school due to it being closed as the teachers were on strike. I ventured out in the afternoon to pick up my wages from work and made the walk into town to visit NHCC. Upon my arrival the time was around half three in the afternoon. The shop was empty of customers and Graham was at the one of the monitors testing out a new game he'd just received for the Spectrum. I

watched the screen as I saw a *'Knight Lore'* style game but with more modern looking graphics and featuring a main character dressed in a long coat, hat and trousers. He was beautifully animated as he walked around the various screens littered with tables, chairs, house plants, cupboards, animated tape recorders, hat stands, radiators and framed pictures up on the walls. I asked Graham what it was and he pulled the tape out of the cassette recorder and showed me that it was a new game by Imagine called *'Movie'*. I knew at this point that any new Imagine games were really released by Ocean Software as they'd bought the label after the original incarnation had gone bust. This had been clarified by looking at the adverts for Imagine games as their address and phone number were exactly the same as Ocean Software's. As Graham passed me the tape any doubts that Ocean and Imagine were one of the same were dispersed immediately as it bore an Ocean Software label along with the words 'Pre Production Sample'. I had never heard of this game; I'd not seen any adverts for it either and asked Graham "So what are you going to do with the tape now?" "Well, there's not a lot I can do with it now I've seen the game. I certainly can't put it on the shop shelf!", he replied. The thought of owning an unreleased and finished Ocean/Imagine game was way too exciting for words so I summoned up the courage and asked him if he'd sell it to me, even if it didn't come with any box, inlay or instructions. At first he wouldn't. "Well, we're not really allowed to sell these. It's just a sample so that we can decide if we want to stock it or not. The shop could get into trouble if anyone were to find out that I'd sold it on". I blagged it, "Oh please? I won't tell anyone where I got it from." I whined. After ten seconds of thinking about it Graham agreed to sell it to me for three quid, the price of a budget game. I was well chuffed. I handed over my money and walked home pleased with my illicit acquisition. The first thing I did when I got home was load it up to make sure it worked on my own set up and marvelled at the fantastic loading screen that came with the game. I hadn't seen it in the shop as it was already loaded by the time I arrived. I was well impressed. The screen was, it would turn out, another well executed computer version of the Bob Wakelin artwork that would adorn the box and magazine adverts, and had been drawn by F.D. Thorpe. I made sure I took the tape to school on Monday to show it off to my ZX Spectrum buddies. No one had seen a *'Pre Production Sample'* computer game before. My mates were very jealous and hassled me to get a copy of the game for themselves. I didn't let anyone and got out letting up by telling them that I would get the person who supplied it to me in serious trouble if I did. I wanted to keep this exclusive for myself, at least until the game had appeared in the shops.

On Sunday 2 February I crawled out of bed late at mid-day. After spending the afternoon visiting Hayden I came home at 7:45pm and sat down at my ZX Spectrum and drew a new screen. This latest effort featured Ultimate's Sabreman character at centre stage holding aloft his trusty sabre along with a worried look on his face. On his left I placed some vegetation and, on his opposite side, a smiling green frog. I had managed to get some colour in this time. I made sure that Sabreman's face, arms and the parts of his legs that weren't covered by socks, lay on the 8x8 pixel boundary so that I was able to colour those areas white. His socks took up one character square and I had decided they were to be coloured purple. His costume and the two decorations either side were coloured green. The screen, once finished, looked a little bare. I guess, at this point, I didn't have the patience to fill a whole screen yet. I had too many distractions – games to play – to keep focused on drawing graphics for too long.

Exactly a week later, on Friday 7 February, *'Movie'* was properly released and arrived in the shops. I marvelled at the Bob Wakelin artwork on the front of the box that the ace loading screen had been referenced from. I then did something odd and bought it again, this time paying the full £7.95 retail price. Why did I buy a game I already had? I'm not really sure! Looking back, I think I did it so that Graham would see that by selling me the pre-production tape he had acquired of the game he hadn't lost his shop a sale, in fact he'd made an extra £3. I thought the game was great and had an extra week playing it that all the other ZX Spectrum owners didn't have. To thank him for doing that for me, I stumped up the cash for the proper release. Also, there was always a chance that Graham may get more unreleased games. Thinking ahead, I wanted to make sure I had a chance, should the opportunity ever present itself again, of persuading Graham to sell me those too.

On Friday 14 February I was ill and didn't go to school. Being poorly didn't stop me walking down to NHCC later though where I saw, for the first time ever, the new 128k Sinclair ZX Spectrum that the shop had received stock of that very day which was retailing at £179.95. This was the machine that's now affectionately referred to as the *'toast rack'* model due to the metal heat sink screwed onto the right side of the keyboard. During production it had been code named *'The Derby'* and had been produced in conjunction with Sinclair's Spanish distributor Investrónica. It was launched in that country 5 months before in September 1985. Sinclair had delayed the UK launch of the 128k due to the fact they still had lots of outstanding stock of the 48k ZX Spectrum+ machines sitting there doing not very much in their warehouses. Sinclair felt that had the 128k been available to buy any earlier in the UK then they'd have had trouble selling any + models over Christmas. The company needed to shift the backlog first. I liked the look of the 128k ZX Spectrum with its new three channel AY sound chip being my main draw so over the next

few months I tried to work out how I was going to be able to get my own.

At the end of February and into the early part of March I had to sit my end of year CSE and O Level exams. This was what the whole of my school life had been building up to. All the teachers had spent the last few months banging on at us about getting our heads down and revising at every possible opportunity. I had done some revision but I also had ZX Spectrum games to play and a job to go to! I didn't really take any of it as seriously as I should have. I hated exams. They made me nervous and anxious. I did well enough in normal lessons in the classroom but I didn't deal very well with having to try and recall everything I'd learned over the last year all at the same time. My mind would just go blank and I'd always find that I'd revised the parts that didn't ever get mentioned in the exam itself. Before the real exams though we had to go through a series of mocks, the dates of which were recorded in my diary:

| | | |
|------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Thursday 20 February: | AM | – Computer Studies |
| | PM | – English 1 |
| Friday 21 February: | PM | – English 2 |
| Monday 24 February: | AM | – Geography (“ <i>hard!</i> ”) |
| Tuesday 25 February: | AM | – Maths |
| Wednesday 26 February: | | Physics (I missed this as I had “ <i>pewked up at 7:30pm last night. Didn't go to skool.</i> ”) |
| Thursday 27 February: | AM | – Biology |
| | PM | – English 3 |
| Friday 28 February: | PM | – Engineering Drawing |
| Wednesday 5 March: | All day | – Art |

For us boys in our final year school finished early that last day at precisely 12:55 pm on Friday 21 March. For the first time in living memory I was no longer legally required to attend school. I still had my real exams to take though which were due to start in just over a month. We had a few more weeks of revision and then me and all my school chums had to sit through the exams for real. I failed to fill in my diary during this period, probably because I was stressed out, but some dates still exist on a timetable I was given:

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Thursday 8 May: | Physics (Practical) 1 hour |
| Wednesday 21 May: | English 1 (Aural) 1 hour approx' |
| Tuesday 20 May: | AM – Art History |
| Tues 3 June: | 9:30–11:15 – English 2 |
| Wednesday 4 June: | 9:30–10:30 – Biology 1 |
| Friday 6 June: | 9:30–11:15 – Physics 1 and 2 |
| Monday 9 June: | 9:30–11:30 – Physics 3 |
| Wednesday 11 June: | 9:30–11:30 – Maths |
| Thursday 12 June: | 9:30–11:30 – Biology 2 and 3 |

Meanwhile, and more importantly (more important than life defining exams?!), I still had my eye on the new 128k ZX Spectrum machine so, over time, I saved up as much money as I could and, eventually, found someone who wanted to buy my 48k ZX Spectrum+ machine from me for an acceptable price. I was still buying new games while trying to save up which was a bit silly of me! I just couldn't help myself and had I had a bit more self-discipline I could have saved up the required amount a lot quicker. I still managed to gather most of the money off my own back but in the end found myself a few quid short so my parents said they'd pay the difference and sometime around April 1986 I acquired my own '*toast rack*' ZX Spectrum 128k computer. The package came with two specially written 128k titles from Ocean Software – '*The NeverEnding Story*', which now loaded in all in one go instead of, as with the 48k version I had already bought, four separate loads. The adventure game also had a great 128k version of the Limahl song from the film that had been converted to the ZX Spectrum by Fred Gray which played while the game was running. Once it got too annoying, which it did after the fourth or fifth run through, you could just turn the volume down on the television for a bit of peace and quiet. A 128k version of '*Daley Thompson's Supertest*' was the other game included. It too loaded all in one go compared to the two separate programs that were written to work on the 48k machine and also had some nice 128k music added to the mix. As I would never play my boring old silent and multi-load 48k version of '*The NeverEnding Story*' that was soon taken to the second-hand shop and the cash gained put towards another new game.

On Thursday 29 May the June edition, issue 29, of '*Crash*' hit the shelves. '*Heavy on the Magick*', the forthcoming new game from Gargoyle Games, was the subject of the stunning Oliver Frey front cover. Text on the cover teased that Ultimate's long awaited '*Pentagram*' game had, at last, been reviewed. That

was particularly exciting as the game wasn't in the shops yet and this would be my first opportunity to see what it actually looked like. So, I bought my copy of 'Crash', got home and sat down in the living room to have a read. As always, I ignored the index – I much preferred to first go through the magazine not knowing what was coming next. The first game to be reviewed was 'Spindizzy', written by Paul Shirley and Phil Churchyard and released on the Electric Dreams label. The game had been *Smashed* and received an overall of 93%. I liked the look of it and a mental note was made to myself to make sure I acquired a copy (in the end I bought it). Mastertronic's 'Knight Tyme' was reviewed on the next page and was the recipient of another *Smash* gaining a score of 94%. Written by David Jones, 'Knight Tyme' was notable as it was the first ever 128k only game to gain the coveted award and it came at a budget price. A *Crash Smash* for £2.99? Another purchase was deemed necessary. A third *Smash* followed with 'Red Hawk' by Melbourne House with it receiving a respectable 91%. For some odd reason there were no other marks, just the overall percentage. I turned the page and the sequel to the brilliant 'Highway Encounter' by Vortex Software had received its review. 'Alien Highway', also by Vortex, had scored 88% and was not *Smashed*. I could see why. It looked almost exactly the same as its predecessor. A case of trying to repeat a previous success without actually improving on it maybe? 'V' by Ocean Software was the next review to grab my attention. Having been heavily advertised I was keen to see what 'V' looked like. It didn't look that great. The 70% score ensured I didn't have to even contemplate forking out money for it. A few pages on 'Spiky Harold', a budget game on the Firebird label that I'd already bought, earned an average score of 60%. Next up was Firebird's 'The Comet Game' – another title I'd just forked out cash for with it costing me £7.95. I hadn't liked it at all and the game had sat on the shelf since my initial go with it. 'Crash' clarified what I thought by scoring it 58%. Had I waited for the review before buying it I definitely would have saved my money for something else. Ocean's delayed 'Super Bowl' review awarded it 85%. A good score but as I had no interest whatsoever in American football I wasn't interested in the game in the slightest. A quick scan through the letters section followed then I read a bit of the article on Realtime Games Software who had written '3D Tank Duel', '3D Starstrike' and its sequel 'Starstrike II' which I had purchased and loved. These pieces on the companies that made the games were one of my favourite type of article in 'Crash' and I would read them from beginning to end. I was fascinated by how the games were made. I skipped the educational software reviews, I never read that section. Sorry Rosetta. I browsed the 'Playing Tips' section to see if there was anything that could help me with any games I was currently playing then flicked through the 'Tech Niche' and 'Tech Tips' sections. The 'Play By Mail' section interested me even less than American Football so that was skipped. Next up was 'The Adventure Trail' which featured another *Crash Smash* as its lead review. This time it was for 'Heavy on the Magick', the game on the cover. I'd loved all of Gargoyle Games' previous titles so this was another that I immediately deemed an essential purchase. It looked great and it had the added bonus of two channel music, all of their previous games didn't have any tunes! 'Heavy on the Magick' received a stellar 9.

A skim through the next few pages followed until I had a nose at the 'Top 30 for June' double page spread. 'Commando' by Elite was at the number one position in the arcade chart and 'Lord of the Rings' by Melbourne House sat at the top in the adventure equivalent. I flicked past the Frontline section. I wasn't a fan of strategy games and always thought they looked at least three years old compared to the type of games I liked playing. Strategy games had, in the main, basic looking graphics and didn't interest me at all and, sometimes, were still written using BASIC routines. Ugh!

Then, a few pages on, I reached page 113. Immediately I did a double take. What? It took a few seconds for me to realise I was looking at my own work – in the pages of 'Crash'! There in front of me was a whole page devoted to four of my own ZX Spectrum screens. It momentarily took my breath away. I'd been featured within the pages of my most favourite magazine ever. This was a new section 'Crash' were doing each month called 'On the Screen' and it featured ZX Spectrum artwork that had been sent in by readers. Yours truly was the subject of the first one. I had completely forgotten that I'd sent a tape of some of my screens to 'Crash', it had been at least three or four months before when I posted the tape – a long time when you're 15. I didn't know anyone else who'd had their name in 'Crash' before. I could not wait for all my mates to see it. I didn't have to show it to any of them as I knew they all bought their own copy and would see it for themselves sooner or later but I would still be making them aware of it just in case they had skimmed past the feature. As I looked closer at the feature I noticed, with horror, that I'd made some mistakes in the screens I'd sent in. The thing is, I'd drawn these screens on my black and white television up in my bedroom and hadn't actually checked that all the colours were right first by setting up my ZX Spectrum on the downstairs television set which was a colour model. Had I done so then the colouring errors would have been glaringly obvious. Three of the four screens printed, 'Yellow Submarine', 'Sabreman' and 'Ghosts 'n' Goblins', had a fair amount of colour in them. The last one, 'The Balloon' was black and white and was a really early effort I'd drawn back when I didn't dare try to use any colour. On the 'Yellow Submarine' screen I saw that I had coloured the blue meanies teeth yellow in error. They should

have been cyan. On a black and white television it's very hard to see the difference between yellow and cyan so I hadn't noticed. On the '*Sabreman*' screen I had left a few pixels on the edge of his clothing white. They should have been green. Something else I'd missed. The worst mistakes were in the '*Ghosts 'n' Goblins*' screen, which had been printed in the magazine larger than the other three. I had thought I'd put dark green attributes behind the two gravestones in order to try and make it look like a shadow. I'd done it wrong and those blocks were magenta! Ugh! It was completely the wrong colour and they stuck out like a sore thumb. Lesson learned then - check your colour screens on a colour television before showing them to anyone else! I was a bit embarrassed by '*The Balloon*' and really wish I hadn't put it on the tape. I had improved a lot over the last few months and it really did look rubbish compared to the more recent ZX Spectrum work I had produced. Never mind. Someone at '*Crash*' must have liked it enough for them to choose to print it. The write up mentioned that I was about to leave school and that I was looking for a job as a screen designer. Surely now I'd get an influx of job offers and wouldn't even have to look myself? Interested software houses were to ring '*Crash*' and they would pass on my details. I really was on cloud nine and, up to now, it was one of the most amazing things to ever happen to me. I'd never had a letter printed in a comic, never had any of my art shown in the gallery on '*Take Hart*' or had a '*Jim'll Fix it*' fixed by Jimmy Saville (looking back, thankfully!) As far as I was concerned this was better than any of those. I had a whole page to myself in my favourite magazine!

It was really quite bizarre seeing images that I'd only previously seen in my bedroom on my own ZX Spectrum screen printed in real ink in a real magazine that would be sitting on the shelves of WHSmiths and newsagents up and down the country. One thing I took note of was that my '*Ghosts 'n' Goblins*' screen, which up to then was probably the most accomplished screen I'd manage to draw, looked a little empty. It was due to seeing it in print that made me realise it really wasn't finished. Again, I'd lost interest halfway through drawing it and had told myself I was done when really it needed more work. I started to think about what I could do to improve it.

Once I'd managed to get over the shock of what had just occurred, I flicked through the rest of this month's '*Crash*'. A few mediocre game reviews followed then I reached '*Merely Mangram*', my favourite section about new titles that were currently under development. I read that section from beginning to end as I always did and read about forthcoming titles like '*The Price of Magick*' by Level 9, '*Mandragore*', a huge game released on two cassettes that contained 260k's worth of data, from Infogrames, '*Stalag*' from Denton Designs (which was eventually released by Ocean after a name change to '*The Great Escape*'), '*Contact Sam Cruise*' by Microsphere, '*Paperboy*' by Elite received a mention, news that Gargoyle Games were now producing '*Scooby Doo*' for Elite after their own cartoon styled game failed to come up to scratch, Odin's '*Kimera*' which by now had been renamed '*Heartland*' and a comment about '*Fairlight II*', one game I was looking forward to owning which was already heavily delayed. A few pages of more specific previews followed with '*Pyracurse*' by Hewson Consultants catching my eye then a whole page devoted to Elite's '*Ghosts 'n' Goblins*', another one that joined my potential purchase list. After another couple pages of black and white and low scoring games reviews it was back to full colour for Gremlin Graphics' '*Bounder*' review. Another *Smash* was awarded with 91% given for its graphics and an overall of 90%. I was glad to see this as I'd already had the game for nearly a month, having bought my copy on the Friday 2 May. Seeing a game I'd purchased being awarded a *Crash Smash* made me feel like I knew my stuff when it came to buying good games, especially if I'd managed to pre-empt a *Crash Smash*. The next page featured the all-important review of the latest game from Ultimate Play the Game, '*Pentagram*'. Anyone who had finished their earlier title '*Underwulde*' had heard of this game as you were informed of its name in one of three possible exits. '*Pentagram*' had managed to get a *Crash Smash*. The scores were good, 95% for graphics and an overall of 93%. I looked at the printed screenshot. Again, it looked like '*Pentagram*' used the same engine as '*Knight Lore*' and '*Alien 8*'. Surely it can't be the same game again? Well, '*Crash*' obviously liked it so there must be more to it. "I'll buy it as soon it's released", I thought. I had to wait just over three weeks for it to appear on the shelf at NHCC from where I made my purchase. On the next few pages was yet another colourful *Crash Smash* review, this time for Hewson Consultants' '*Quazatron*', written by the author of the two '*Avalon*' games, Steve Turner. The game received 93% for its graphics and 94% overall. Another purchase that I'd already made off my own back on the 30 April had been awarded '*Crash*'s top accolade.

On Tuesday 10 June 1986 '*Ghost's 'n' Goblins*' on the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad was released by Elite. The Commodore version, written by Chris Butler, was particularly impressive. The game was frequently running on the Commodore 64 set up at NHCC and Karl and Conrad would be found playing on it while the shop was quiet. I thought the music, by Mark Cooksey, was amazing and hearing the fairground type high score music nowadays instantly reminds me of being back in NHCC. This was one of the few games that made me a bit envious of Commodore 64 owners. While '*Ghost's 'n' Goblins*' on the ZX Spectrum was a sterling, if overly hard, conversion on that machine there wasn't any music to go with it. The Commodore's music gave it that little bit of an edge over its Spectrum equivalent. I bought the release

for my computer but never got very far on it as it was just too damn hard. Though, the first time I managed to see the eight-way diagonal scrolling section on the second level, I was super impressed. I had never seen background graphics moving around in all the different directions so fluidly on a ZX Spectrum before.

Other than the lack of music there was one other thing I didn't like about Elite's conversion. I hadn't thought much of the loading screen that came with the game. Bits of it were okay but the worst part was its depiction of the main character. He had a body and head that took up eight characters and a pair of legs that only took up two. It was horrendously out of proportion. I had an idea. The first chance I got I sat down at my Spectrum and completed my own half finished '*Ghost 'n Goblins*' screen – the one that had been printed in '*Crash*'. I made a conscious effort to really try hard and better the commercially released screen. I added the title of the game and the company logo to it as well as amending the fence to make it look a little bigger. I redrew the tree because the original one wasn't good enough, added a worried looking knight to the left, redrew the two gravestones, adding an extra one in the process, removed those ugly magenta squares I'd put behind the graves in error, added a zombie coming into the screen from the right (complete with blood drips under his arms) and finished it off with a dramatic lightning bolt and a tiny flying creature that could be seen in silhouette against the moon. Once I thought I may have actually finished it at last I sat back and looked at it. I then checked it was okay on the colour television downstairs! I really liked it. For the first time I had produced a loading screen that, in my opinion, was better than the one that featured on a real game. I was getting ideas. Could I seriously think about the possibility of designing ZX Spectrum graphics as a real job and actually get paid to do it? I was beginning to think that yes, maybe I could.

My diary recommenced on the day of my last exam which also happened to be my birthday for which I been given, mostly from Mum and Dad, a healthy, for the time, £36. I would have loathed having to sit two Biology exams on a day when I should've been having a good time. Birthdays aren't made for doing exams! I'd bought Elite's '*Ghosts 'n' Goblins*' two days before, I wanted to play that, not be sat doing Biology exams!

I worked at Peachey Bros for just over six months. My original boss was easy to get along with, though I don't remember his name, he was an affable chap. He left a few months after I started and a new manager took over called Miriam and she could be a bit of tyrant. I'd get barked at for dropping a potato on the floor, which I seemed to do often. I had also become very pally with a lot of the Co-Op staff. We worked in the same building, but I wasn't a member of their team. It was me and Miriam on one side and a whole gang of 10-14 people all around my own age on the other side working for the Co-Op. I wanted to be part of that gang now. So, on Saturday 21 June 1986 I worked my last day at Peacheys. My diary proclaims:

"Last day at 'Peacheys' today. No more Miriam."

This was followed by me going over to Paul Aspinall's house in the afternoon and we watched Tobe Hooper's '*Poltergeist*' on VHS video for the first time. We both thought it was a fantastic film and dead scary. I transferred over to the much cooler Co-Op for real a few days later and stopped working all those early mornings. Instead I worked 18:30 to 20:30 on Thursday and Friday and four hours on Saturday morning or afternoon and that was either 08:30 to 12:30 or 13:30 to 17:30. The manager at the Co-Op was a short fellow called Mr Marriott. He was a great boss and kept his teenage part-timers all under control. He had the sort of personality that would make you really like him, he could be a good laugh, but you didn't want to piss him off as he wasn't scared to give anyone a telling off. A balance that was essential for someone who has to keep control of a bunch of kids in a working environment. I was also now part of the team that my mate Nick was in. We now worked together. I was no longer the sole employee as I had been at Peachey Bros and had a new set of work mates who got on with each other out of work as well as in.

Thursday 28 August came and that meant the next edition of '*Crash*' magazine was on the shelves at the newsagent. Issue 32 sported another eye-catching cover, this time featuring '*Dan Dare*', who had become popular decades before in the pages of '*Eagle*' comic and was now the subject of a brand new computer game by Virgin. On page 32 was a review of both the, now a year old, 48k version and, newly released, 128k version of '*The Music Box*'. I'd been using the Wham! pop group affiliated 48k version for nearly a year now, a release '*Crash*', it appears, had failed to review, and was interested to see what this new, more powerful, version that made use of the 128k AY abilities was capable of. As it was featured in the *Tech Niche* section it wasn't awarded an overall percentage like the games were but received an excellent write up that ended with:

"If you were only to buy one music program, then buy The Music Box for the 128. It's a definite winner, and will take a lot of beating."

So that went straight on my 'to-buy' list and would get myself a copy at the first opportunity. I had to wait a

while though. Either the title's release was delayed or I just chose to make other purchases before it because I didn't end up buying *'The Music Box'* until just over three months later when I purchased a copy from NHCC on Tuesday 2 December. It was only after reading the review in *'Crash'* that I noticed the little black box on the top right of the page and saw, much to my amazement, that the text referred to me! I had got a second mention in my favourite magazine:

"Mark Jones of Northampton has sent in a Wham! Music Box generated tape of about 14 tunes for my approval – Gosh I could be a music critic as well!! Anyway, they are passable and are a good example of what you can do if you put your mind to it. Mark also suggests that owners of this program can have flashing borders in time to their ditties by typing in:

POKE (Start address of tune) + 132, 19

that is to say, if the start address of the Whampiled tune is 327678 you would type in:

POKE 32900, 19"

I was a little miffed, for a bit anyway, at the "passable" comment but persuaded myself they must have liked them at least a little bit to have even given them a mention! I thought my two channel Spectrum symphonies were brilliant. Still, I now had another mention in *'Crash'* as another string to my bow with my art and music both being featured. Oh, and that 'poke' they printed - I didn't find it through any clever machine code big-boffin knowledge. It was a pure fluke. I was bored one day and started typing in random 'pokes' once I had one of my tunes in the memory of my computer. Most of them didn't do much other than change the border colour, made the code emit a screech of white noise or just full-on crashed the machine. The one *'Crash'* printed worked though and made the border look like the ZX Spectrum was loading a game but with magenta and black lines instead of yellow and blue which danced in time to the tune for its duration. I used that quite a bit in my little programs I was starting to put together. I thought it looked great and had never seen it used in any games released commercially.

At NSB I had quite liked Mr Heathcote, my last English teacher. He was in his late fifties or early sixties, had wispy white hair, what was left of it, and looked rather frail but was always helpful should I have ever felt the need to ask for it. I had found his lessons frustrating though as he could not control his classes. He was just a sweet old man in charge of a class full of 15 year old boys so some of them would take advantage of this and wreak havoc during lesson time. That would usually entail boys throwing things around the classroom, doing silly voices, laughing out loud and back chatting him. The worst behaviour I witnessed was in response to him asking a certain person, who was one of the ring leaders of this disruptive behaviour, to calm down and sit back at his chair as he was disturbing the whole class. He turned to the class and replied with "Keep your hair on!" while pointing at Mr Heathcote's balding head followed by a huge laugh. Some of the class laughed at this but most of us didn't, including me. I thought it was a bit below the belt to get personal. While sometimes this one lad could be genuinely funny, after twenty minutes of him arsing around the classroom, it could get a bit grating. Especially if there was something you really had to be getting on with. Sometimes it was just impossible to concentrate during these English lessons. I don't think anyone meant Mr Heathcote any real malice. It was all meant in jest and I never saw anyone do anything physically violent towards him. Sometimes it would take another teacher, who'd be passing by in the corridor outside, to notice the noise coming from the classroom. They'd stick their head round the door and tell everyone to shut up. Usually, this did the trick.

One day during the school summer holiday of 1986 I had picked up that day's edition of Northampton's Chronicle and Echo newspaper. On the front page, along with a large photo of him, was the news that Mr Heathcote had committed suicide by gassing himself in his car while it had been sat in his garage at home. The article went on to tell us that he had been upset at the state of schools in general and, possibly due to the fact that capital punishment was now frowned upon in schools, pupils had less reason to behave themselves. Why should they? What was the worst that could happen? Not much. I couldn't help but think back to those chaotic English lessons and seeing Mr Heathcote sat at the front by his desk looking on helplessly as the class went crazy. I hope he rests in peace.

My exam results arrived sometime over the summer. I hadn't done very well. I hadn't really partaken in much revision and that was reflected in most of my grades:

CSE results:

ENGLISH
BIOLOGY

GRADE TWO
GRADE THREE

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| PHYSICS | GRADE THREE |
| MATHEMATICS | GRADE FOUR |
| GEOGRAPHY | GRADE FOUR |
| TECHNICAL DRAWING | GRADE TWO |
| COMPUTER STUDIES | GRADE TWO |

O LEVEL results:

| | |
|---------------------|----------|
| ART | GRADE B |
| ENGLISH ORAL | GRADE 2 |
| ENGLISH | GRADE D |
| BIOLOGY | GRADE E |
| PHYSICS | GRADE E |
| GEOGRAPHY | UNGRADED |

In September I had decided I had amassed a semi-decent portfolio of ZX Spectrum graphic screens. Could I, perhaps, show some of them off to software houses I admired on the slim chance that I might actually get paid for doing some more in a professional capacity? I had loaded up some of my work in the computer shop and the resultant approval from Graham, Ken, Karl and Conrad made me think I could be in with a chance. I put together a demo tape of what I thought were my best screens and sent between five and ten tapes off in the post to various companies. Back then there was no real information on who were just publishers and who actually had in-house staff so I just picked some of whom their games I had liked in the past. Amongst the companies who received my tape were Mastertronic, Elite Systems, Ocean Software and Piranha. I didn't have to wait long to get my first reply as Mastertronic wrote back very quickly and said:

"Thank you for submitting your software to us for evaluation. Having reviewed it thoroughly I'm afraid we are unable to accept it for publication at this time."

I thought their letter was a bit ridiculous. I hadn't even sent them a finished game. I was asking if they had any jobs going for a graphic artist. I began to wonder if they'd even loaded the tape I'd sent at all. The letter ended with:

"Once more thank you for your interest in our company. I enclose your program here in."

I hadn't sent them a program! It was a demo of my screens. Oh well, their loss! In November a letter arrived with an Elite Systems postmark on the front. Upon opening it someone called Nigel Alderton was asking to see a demo of my work. I thought that was a bit odd as I had enclosed a demo tape with every letter I'd sent. Obviously, it had got separated from my letter whilst at Elite and had maybe fallen down the side of someone's desk or worse, into a bin. I learned from this that if you were to send a tape to a software company then you really had to write your name and address on the tape as well as the letter in case they got separated from each other. So, I sent another. Then I wondered where I knew Nigel's name from as I thought I'd heard it before somewhere else. A bit of detective work resulted in me finding out that he was the author of the fantastic 'Chuckie Egg' game, published by A'n'F Software in 1984, that me and my sisters had played loads a few years back. I was chuffed that I now had his autograph on the bottom of the letter he'd sent me. A bit later Piranha replied and they, at least, explained to me that they didn't have any in-house programmers and that I should send in any complete games "should you develop any". Good job really because they soon ceased trading less than a year later. Had I gone to work for them then my story could well have been very different. Mid-December came and another letter arrived from Elite:

"We are in receipt of your graphics demonstration.

Your work is obviously of the highest standard and although we have no need for your services at present, I would like to keep your details on file for future reference.

I would be pleased if you could write quoting a price for your work."

Again, it was signed by my Spectrum 'hero' Nigel Alderton. I was well chuffed that someone who was, in my eyes, famous, like Nigel, had thought my work was "of the highest standard". The last bit confused me though. A price for my work? I hadn't got a flipping clue. How long did it take to draw a ZX Spectrum

screen? Well it depended on how complex and detailed it was. It could take anything between a few hours to a week. How was I supposed to give him a price for that? It didn't make any sense to me so that was that and I didn't reply. Then it all went quiet and I resigned myself to the fact it probably wasn't going to be as easy as I thought getting a job making graphics for computer games for a living.

Every Saturday, when I wasn't working at the Co-Op, I was spending the whole other half of the day hanging out in NHCC as well as many hours after school in the week. I thought I may as well take the plunge and try for a job there instead. I was sure I could put my extensive gaming knowledge and customer service skills to good use. Christmas was approaching and they'd just taken on a new Saturday lad called Jason Gould. Graham's son Paul had also been working every Saturday. After having a word with Graham and Ken at NHCC I secured myself a job and at the end of November 1986 I handed in my notice at the Co-Op and started working there full-time five days a week with one day off in the middle of the week. I was now earning way more money than I had been getting at the Co-Op and I was surrounded with computers, games and the staff there that were now my friends. I loved it. I had already amassed a good knowledge base on the ZX Spectrum and its immense software library and I started to learn about the other machines that were popular at the time like the Commodore 64, Commodore 16, Amstrad CPC 464 (tape based) and 6128 (disc based). I knew nothing about the Amstrad PCW range of Word Processing computers, or the Amstrad 1512 and 1640 DOS based PC's and, at first, would freeze when a customer came in enquiring about them! I would scuttle out the back and ask Graham, Ken or Karl to come out front to help them. Graham taught me how to remember which PC's had the better graphics. A CGA PC had 'crappy graphics' and VGA 'very good graphics' though that's not what the initials actually stood for. CGA meant 'Colour Graphics Adapter' and VGA 'Video Graphics Array'. I preferred Graham's explanation! Graham and Ken were great bosses, they rarely, if ever, were in a bad mood and I worked hard, served hordes of people with a smile and always bent over backwards to answer any questions or sort out any problems they had. Another bonus was that I was allowed to borrow a game or two over night as long as I promised to bring them back in time for the next shop opening. I was in heaven. The shop had a great atmosphere with really nice people – staff and customers. I loved it. Very soon the shop would employ another person to help fix the influx of broken computers, a young lad called Steven Knight, and more Saturday staff, amongst them, Nathan Gould, Jason's younger brother, to cope with the increase in trade. NHCC now employed around eight staff.

At busy times we had to wheedle out time wasters as we had a big problem with people coming in and asking for new releases to be loaded up in the shop so they could try them out only for them to spend twenty minutes playing it. They would then leave without buying anything, or worse, try and walk out with the tape. With a live cassette out on the shop floor we had to be keep a beady eye on it at all times in case someone decided to make it 'accidentally' fall into their pocket, which was happening more and more often. We'd just be left with an empty tape case and inlay which we, obviously, couldn't sell. All of this was beginning to take up too much time with not enough resultant sales to make it worthwhile. So, we had to start asking customers to put a cash deposit down on the game in order to try it out. The amount of people who would then say, "Oh no, it's okay then" and walk out proved that they didn't have any money on them in the first place. They just wanted to play games while they were in town to kill some time. They had no intention of actually making a purchase. Sometimes we'd go out on to the shop floor to put the doubles that had been sold back out on display and sitting there on the shelf would be an empty tape box with a price sticker on it. People were nicking inlays to go with the C15 copy they had made from their mate's original. We had to be more and more vigilant and keep our eyes peeled to make sure things didn't go missing. Once an inlay was gone the tape was unsellable – software companies did not supply replacement inlays as that would only increase the chance of people blagging them to go with pirated tapes.

One Saturday I was working at NHCC wearing my favourite blue jumper. After being there an hour or so I kept noticing an unpleasant odour. Was it someone's aftershave? A customer's hair spray? As time went by the smell got worse and worse. It had a horrible chemical eye stinging type aroma to it. After puzzling about this for about two hours I smelt my own jumper and discovered, to my horror, the smell was coming from me! I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed it. It was foul. Could the customers smell it? It was so strong I was sure they must've been able to. I couldn't even take the offending jumper off as I had nothing on underneath it. It turned out one of the family cats, either Misty, a recent addition to the family's pets, or Whiskers, had done a wee on my jumper as it was lying on my chair in my room overnight. I'd put it on in the morning unaware the cat had used it as a toilet. As the time went on, the worse the smell got. I spent the whole day feeling anxious and looking closely at customer's faces for a twitch of their noses or looks of disgust as the reeking stench hit their nostrils. Never did I want 5:30pm to arrive so quickly as I did that day so I could go home, take the jumper off and put the damn thing in the wash. The smell hung about in my nostrils for the next twenty-four hours.

Near the end of the year Adrian and I decided to try and make a ZX Spectrum game together with

Adrian doing the clever stuff and me producing the illustrations. I'd had a previous practice during the summer at writing an adventure myself using *'The Quill'* based on our house in Lutterworth Road and the surrounding area and called it *'Abington Adventure'*. It wasn't much cop and some of the language in it could be called into question nowadays but it proved to me it was possible to make something playable. Not long before Adrian had spent a whopping £22.95 on Incentive's *'The Graphic Adventure Creator'* which was a utility that allowed people with no coding knowledge to write a type-in adventure game. Adrian had been fiddling about it with it on and off over the last few months and now felt confident enough to be able to make a whole game using it. The package was first previewed in *'Crash'* number 28 from May 1986 then reviewed in issue 32 from September of that year where *'The Graphic Adventure Creator'* was awarded a coveted *Crash Smash* award. *'The Quill'* had been the only previously available adventure creator but that was, originally, text only. (Later an additional utility called *'The Illustrator'* was released that, alongside *'The Quill'*, allowed you to add graphics to any 'Quilled' adventures). This new package allowed you to add graphic representations of each location from the start should you wish. Adrian made me a pirate copy to use at home and I borrowed his manual then went to the library in town to make a photocopy of the bits that related to the graphics so that I would know what I was doing. We thought up a clichéd ridden plot all about long lost Egyptian treasure and got to work. We invented a new software company to 'publish' the game under called Excalibur Soft and named the game *'Gone Missin'* (with no 'g' at the end). I soon realised that over complicated location images ate up heaps of memory so had to simplify many of them so that Adrian could fit the adventure itself in. A month or so of work later the adventure was finished, fully tested and, as far as we knew, bug free. I set about drawing a loading screen for the game and wrote a tune for it using *'Wham! The Music Box'*.

For some reason I drew three completely different loading screens for *'Gone Missin'*. The first showed our hero discovering a Mummy sarcophagus in an ancient, hidden cavern unaware that things were hiding in the dark. This was the one I used on the actual tape of the game. The second screen, which I think I probably did after we'd put the game to bed, depicted the player running down to a small boat on the shores of a deserted beach. Behind him things are crawling out of the sandy beach in order to try and stop him escaping. The third and final screen shows as the main image, a golden death mask of the type that encased great Pharaoh's faces. Surrounding the image on the left is a shadowy figure walking through the jungle holding someone's decapitated head. On the right is a vampire type figure holding his cloak up to his face so that his features are unseen though he can see you. To me now this one looks like the best one, but the tape I have of the game doesn't feature this or the second loading screen at all which I why I think I drew both of them after the case just to see if I could better the one I went with.

So that the game could sit on my shelf alongside titles I'd bought I produced an inlay using a pencil image on the cover of the player reaching for the golden mask. Behind him is the cloaked vampire fellow shown in the third loading screen and a tribe of agitated natives jumping around holding axes and spears. Also on it was the loading instructions, hints, the games credits and an apology stating that we couldn't change the character set used in the game because the utility makes any game written with it revert to the default Spectrum character set each time a new game was started. This was all written in my neatest handwriting. I added some non-existent and, so I thought, 'hilarious' reviews:

"What the critics said:

"I used to play Max Headroom and wash tramps. Now I just wash tramps."

Billy Wragg (Tramp Washer)

"What? No sex, no titties? What are they playing at? Rubbish!"

Richard Dirt (The Sun)

"Absolutely fab, buy it."

Adrian Singh (Author)

"Brilliant, the graphics are ace!"

Mark Jones (Graphic Designer)

"I didn't know how to load mine!"

Fred Harris (Micro Live)

"My BBC wouldn't accept it!"

Lesley Judd (Micro Live)

“When is it coming out on my computer man?”
C64 owner

ALL REVIEWERS WHO HAVE GIVEN 'GONE MISSIN' A BAD
REVIEW HAVE SINCE DIED”

On the inlay's flap is written:

“WITH THANKS TO 'PHYLISS PHOTOCOPIER AND 'GWENDOLIN GLUE',
WITHOUT WHOM YOU WOULDN'T HAVE THIS NICE INLAY!!”

Once the first part had loaded in the tune I had composed played (with the flashy border poke enabled!) along with the game's instructions:

“YOU TAKE ON THE ROLE OF MR ***
(YOU WILL REALISE LATER WHY I
HAVE NOT DIVULGED HIS NAME) IN
THE QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN MSK
OF 'TOOTINKARMUN'. YOU WILL (IF
YOU'RE CLEVER ENOUGH) JOURNEY
TO THE FAR AWAY ISLAND OF

MATTAWAKEEHAROM

WHICH IS SITUATED JUST OFF
CLACTON PIER. HERE YOU WILL
BATTLE AGAINST OVERWHELMING
ODDITIES IN ORDER TO REACH
YOUR GOAL..... ALL I CAN SAY IS

GOOD LUCK!”

A press of a key stops the music and brings up a secondary message:

“START DE TAPE UP
AND PRESS ANY KEY

'GONE MISSIN' USES UP ALL BUT
4 BYTES OF THE SPECTRUMS
MEMORY”

The game then loads in the loading screen and then the code of the actual game itself. Once loading is complete the first location is described along with the accompanying location image (“You are in your small but comfortable office.”) and the quest begins! If you were tempted to type in the inevitable swear word it produces the response:

“YOU BLOODY SCUMBAG, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, NICK BEADMAN?”

Whoops! Sorry about that Nick! The game turned out okay and I had fun drawing all the graphics for it. I think we may have sent it off to a few budget companies to see if they wanted to release it but not many, if any, even bothered to reply. It sat on my shelf for years, unknown and unplayed by the masses. Even Adrian eventually lost his only copy. Luckily I kept mine and, many years later, it was transferred to a PC and now sits on the ‘*World of Spectrum*’ and ‘*Spectrum Computing*’ websites where you can sample its many delights (and download a digital copy of the 'hilarious' inlay) should you so wish:

<https://www.worldofspectrum.org/infoseekid.cgi?id=0017422>
https://spectrumcomputing.co.uk/entry/17422/ZX-Spectrum/Gone_Missin

thirty three years long years later me and Adrian would release our second, and much better, ZX Spectrum game together! This one couldn't have been any more well received all over the world due to the power of the internet! More of that later!

The run up to Christmas is a busy period in any shop and for NHCC Christmas 1986 was no exception. While I don't recall one specific game being the big number one seller that year I do recall selling lots of copies of *'Ghosts 'n' Goblins'* and *'Paperboy'* by Elite and *'Dragon's Lair'* by Software Projects on all three of the most popular 8-bit platforms. Computers and their games were proving to be even more popular than the year before. For my main Christmas present that year from Mum and Dad I asked for a *'Ram Music Machine'* add-on for my ZX Spectrum. Retailing at a whopping (at the time) £49.95 and produced by Flare Technology Ltd, based in Aldershot, it was supposed to turn my ZX Spectrum into *'the complete home computer music system'*. I'd seen the impressive looking computer generated double page advertisements for the *'Music Machine'* in magazines which promised *'sound sampling'*, *'eight voices'* *'include drums, piano and synthesizer'* and *'a powerful drum section with real drums sounds and a complete rhythm editor'*. It was also possible to *'MIDI interface to other musical instruments'* but seeing as the only musical instrument we had in the house was my sister's recorder I hadn't got a clue what that meant! Still, I thought it sounded good and was worth looking at further. I'd been dabbling with music on the Spectrum already using *'Wham! The Music Box'* and this looked like it could be the next purchase I needed to make in order to take my computer music talents to the next level! *'Crash'* had reviewed the *'Music Machine'* in issue 34 from November 1986 and had sung its praises ending the review with:

"Clearly, the Music Machine is going to be the basis of several specialised music utilities. In general the whole package represents excellent value for money and I would suggest that as Santa is thinking of whipping his reindeer into action soon, it might be an idea to get him to do you the courtesy of dropping a Music Machine down whatever passes for your chimney."

'Sinclair User's review also thought highly of the device signing off their review in issue 55 from October 1986 with:

"It must have the highest fun-per-pfennig rating of any Spectrum peripheral to date."

Christmas day 1986 arrived and I opened my main present, which was always done first, to find my parents had listened to my request and had bought a *'Music Machine'* for me. As much as I wanted to rush to my bedroom and try it out as soon as it was unwrapped, I opened the rest of my presents and waited until everyone else was done before doing so. Once I'd got away and was upstairs I turned my Spectrum on and upon opening the box I found the interface itself, a tape containing the music driver program and, on the B-side, a demo of what was possible called *'Snap the Boogie'*, a microphone for recording samples with, a 38 page instruction manual and a lead that would enable the interface to connect to a MIDI device. This was useless to me as I didn't have a *'hi-fi amplifier, or maybe a guitar amplifier'* in the house so that was never used. Once I had the interface connected up and the program loaded in I then proceeded to work my way through the manual and find out what this thing could actually do. I was eager to hear what it sounded like, something a magazine review is unable to get across to the reader via text on a printed page. I was soon dismayed to find out that, without having an external amplifier, I was only able to listen to the results of the *'Music Machine'* through a set of headphones. I had at least expected the sound to come through the TV speaker as all my ZX Spectrum games did now as I was using my new Sinclair 128k model. Pah! I was up there for hours trying to get something I could show my parents and friends. So, what did I eventually achieve by using this latest, five pence short of fifty quid's worth of, gizmo for the ZX Spectrum? In truth, absolutely nothing. Admittedly the drum samples that came with the machine sounded like real drums but all I could do was press keys to make a drum noise. Arranging a score that would play something like a real drum kit proved nigh on impossible for me. Samples? I managed to record some silly voices, dog barks and farts that could be played back at slightly different speeds. The sample itself couldn't be very long as the *'Music Machine'* quickly filled up the memory available and didn't make use of any of the extra ram the 128k machine provided and the better quality the sample was the more memory it took up. That all proved interesting for at least thirty minutes. I went through the instructions again but still didn't really understand how I was supposed to make anything that sounded like a real tune with it. Anyway, even if I did I could only listen to it through headphones. I wanted to crank the sound up to eleven and make the walls shake. I soon realised that wasn't going to happen. My *'Music Machine'* soon sat gathering dust on top of my wardrobe, sitting on top of my *'Mouse Trap'*, *'Beware the Spider'*, *'Spy Ring'* and *'Connect 4'* board games. I pretended to Mum and Dad that I loved it and really enjoyed using it all the while. I didn't want them to know they'd actually wasted £50!

At the tail end of 1986 I did start to notice that something was happening in the games industry and it wasn't good. Companies that I could have previously relied on to release quality titles were now releasing games that really weren't up to scratch. Most notable were companies that used to be some of my favourites in the business – Quicksilva, Melbourne House and, worst of all because I had held them in high regard previously, Ocean Software. Quicksilva had been bought in 1984 by Argus Press Software and that change saw a steady decline in the quality of their games. Managing Director Rod Cousens and Software Manager Paul Cousens had left Quicksilva to establish a new company called Electric Dreams. By the end of 1986 Quicksilva was releasing, in my opinion, crud like '*Captain Kelly*' and '*Yabba Dabba Do*'. Was this the same company who had released classics like '*3D Ant Attack*', '*Fred*', '*Bugaboo*' and '*Zombie Zombie*'? Apparently not. They'd lost it.

Melbourne House weren't faring any better either. Previous classic releases had included '*Way of the Exploding Fist*', '*Mugsy*', '*Starion*', '*Gyroscope*' and '*Sir Lancelot*'. Now they were publishing below par games that I didn't even try get copies of like '*Asterix and the Magic Cauldron*', '*Dodgy Geezers*', '*Bazooka Bill*' and '*Conquestador*'. Even the long awaited '*Fist II: The Legend Continues*', which was the sequel to their huge smash '*Way of the Exploding Fist*', arrived with a fey slap instead of the hard punch everyone expected. Another of their new games, '*Inspector Gadget*' (based on DIC Entertainment's children's cartoon from 1983) was fully finished but then deemed too poor quality to even release so was canned. '*Sinclair User*' magazine had also noted the dip in quality of Melbourne House's current range of titles in their November issue and, in their Gremlin section, asked "What's up at Melbourne House?" and went on to explain that the company had been cutting staff and the boss (referred to as 'big shot' in the article) Geoff Heath had left the staff team. Seems that him leaving had also meant that their own quality control had taken a nosedive.

Another software company, Ocean Software, who once could be relied on to release quality games were now one, in the main, to avoid. Around half of all their new releases were being universally panned in all the magazines. The reviews for '*Highlander*', '*Street Hawk*', '*Knight Rider*', '*Miami Vice*', '*It's a Knockout*' and '*Mailstrom*' were all pretty crummy. Ocean were still releasing the odd gem like Jon Ritman's '*Batman*', Joffa's '*Cobra*' and Denton Design's '*The Great Escape*' but this wasn't the Ocean Software I had grown to know and love. This was truly mind boggling to me how a company I'd previously held in such high regard and had received mainly good to excellent reviews in '*Crash*' were now getting crummy percentages for their new games. Not only would these percentages make me not want to want to try them out for myself I didn't actually know anyone else who'd forked out the cash for most of them. People did come into NHCC and buy those games though as we sniggered and tittered behind their backs. We imagined the looks on their faces as they got home and played their purchase for the first time. They'd soon realise that they'd bought a dud and had wasted their money. If anyone we knew had bought any of those titles I'm sure our crowd would have derided them for either not waiting for the '*Crash*' review before making their choice or because they'd not seen the review and bought the game just on the strength of the license attached to it. By this time, we all knew that was something you definitely didn't do any more! We'd all fallen foul of the 'blind purchase' and had wised up! Something was obviously going on behind the scenes at Ocean that we, the general public, were unaware of. Little did I know that, had Ocean not gone through this dire period in their history, the next two years of my life could have been very different.

ZX Spectrum software bought in 1986:

(Title, label, price paid, date of purchase (if known), '*Crash*' issue number & date - overall score gained)

1. '**Art Studio**' by OCP/Rainbird, £14.95 from NHCC, Friday 3 January, issue 31, Christmas Special, 1985/1986 – not rated.
2. '**Runestone**' by Firebird, £7.95 from NHCC, Thursday 9 January, issue 17, June 1985 – 9/10.
3. '**Battle of the Planets**' by Mikro-Gen, £9.95 from Boots, Friday 10 January, issue 26, March 1986 – 71%.
4. '**Specventure**' by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), Friday 10 January, no reviews.
5. '**Thunderbirds**' by Firebird, £3.95 from NHCC, Friday 24 January, issue 23 December 1985 – 64%.
6. '**Zoids**' by Martech, £7.95 from NHCC, Monday 27 January, issue 25, February 1986 – 96%.
7. '**Soul of a Robot**' by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 25, February 1986 – 75%.

8. **'Movie'** by Ocean Software (pre-production cassette), £3.00 from NHCC, Friday 31 January.
9. **'Costa Capers'** by Firebird, £2.95 (reduced) from NHCC, Wednesday 5 February, issue 27, April 1986 – 64%.
10. **'Movie'** by Imagine (full price release), £7.95 from NHCC, Friday 7 February, issue 26, March 1986 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
11. **'Gerry the Germ Goes Body Poppin''** by Firebird, £7.95 from NHCC, Saturday 8 February, issue 27, April 1986 – 45%.
12. **'N.O.M.A.D.'** by Ocean Software, £7.95 from NHCC, Monday 17 February, issue 26, March 1986 – 79%.
13. **'Space Hunter'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from Boots, Friday 21 February, no *Crash* review.
14. **'Devil's Crown'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from Boots, Friday 21 February, issue 27, April 1986 – 54%.
15. **'Skyfox'** by Ariolasoft, £8.95 from NHCC, Saturday 1 March, issue 27, April 1986 – 84%.
16. **'ID'** by Nu Wave, £7.95 from NHCC, Friday 7 March, no *Crash* review.
17. **'Legend of the Amazon Women'** by U.S.Gold, £7.95 from NHCC, Saturday 15 March, issue 29, June 1986 – 70%.
18. **'The Incredible Shrinking Fireman'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from unknown shop, Saturday 15 March, issue 28, May 1986 – 68%.
19. **'Sinbad and the Golden Ship'** by Mastervision, £1.99 from unknown shop, Saturday 15 March, no *Crash* review.
20. **'2112 AD'** by Design Design, £7.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 26, March 1986 – 83%.
21. **'Caves of Doom'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 26, March 1986 – 58%.
22. **'Forbidden Planet'** by Design Design, £7.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 26, March 1986 – 86%.
23. **'Sodov the Sorcerer'** by Bug-Byte, £2.95 from NHCC, Friday 4 April, issue 27, April 1986 – 74%.
24. **'Quazatron'** by Hewson Consultants, £8.95 from NHCC, Wednesday 30 April, issue 29, June 1986 – *Crash Smash* 94%.
25. **'Cyberun'** by Ultimate, £9.95 from NHCC, Friday 18 April, issue 28, May 1986 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
26. **'Bounder'** by Gremlin Graphics, £7.95 paid from NHCC, Friday 2 May, issue 29, June 1986 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
27. **'Way of the Tiger'** by Gremlin Graphics, £9.95 from WHSmiths, Saturday 17 May, issue 28, May 1986 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
28. **'Knight Tyme'** by Mastertronic Added Dimension, £2.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 29, June 1986 – *Crash Smash* 94%.
29. **'The Comet Game'** by Firebird from NHCC (receipt lost), £7.95, issue 29, June 1986 – 58%.
30. **'Ghosts 'n' Goblins'** by Elite, £7.95 from NHCC, Tuesday 10 June, issue 30, July 1986 – *Crash Smash* 95%.

31. **'Molecule Man'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC, Thursday 12 June, issue 30, July 1986 – 85%.
32. **'Pentagram'** by Ultimate, £9.95 from NHCC, Friday 20 June, issue 29, June 1986 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
33. **'Spindizzy'** by Electric Dreams, £9.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 29, June 1986 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
34. **'Heavy on the Magick'** by Gargoyle Games, £9.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 29, June 1986 – *Crash Smash* 9/10.
35. **'Spiky Harold'** by Firebird, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 29, June 1986 – 65%.
36. **'Max Headroom'** by Quicksilver, £4.95 (reduced) from WHSmiths, Saturday 19 July 1986, issue 28, May 1986 – 85%.
37. **'Pyracurse'** by Hewson Consultants, £9.95 from NHCC, Friday 18 July, issue 31, August 1986 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
38. **'Price Of Magik'** by Level 9, £9.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 30, July 1986 – *Crash Smash* 94%.
39. **'Bobby Bearing'** by The Edge, £7.95 from NHCC, Wednesday 13 August, issue 31, August 1986 – *Crash Smash* 94%.
40. **'Dynamite Dan II'** by Mirrorsoft for £7.95 from NHCC, Friday 15 August, issue 32, September 1986 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
41. **'Heartland'** by Odin Computer Graphics for £9.95 from NHCC, Friday 29 August, issue 31, August 1986 – *Crash Smash* 92%.
42. **'Con-Quest'** by Mastertronic Added Dimension, £2.99 from NHCC, (receipt lost), issue 31, August 1986 – 39%.
43. **'Master of Magic'** by Mastertronic Added Dimension, £2.99, issue 31 August 1986 – 86%.
44. **'Thrust'** by Firebird, £1.99 from NHCC, Saturday 6 September, issue 34, November 1986 – 76%.
45. **'TT Racer'** by Digital Integration, £9.95 from NHCC, Saturday 6 September, issue 34, November 1986 – 78%.
46. **'Paperboy'** by Elite, £7.95 from NHCC, Monday 15 September, issue 33, October 1986 – 88%.
47. **'Storm'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from NHCC, Saturday 20 September, issue 34, November 1986 – 44%.
48. **'Lightforce'** by Faster Than Light, £7.95 from Boots, Monday 6 October 1986, issue 34, November 1986 – *Crash Smash* 91%.
49. **'Universal Hero'** by Mastertronic, £1.99, from Boots (receipt lost), issue 33 October 1986 – 83%.
50. **'N.E.X.O.R.'** by Design Design, £7.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 33, October 1986 – 81%.
51. **'Trap Door'** by Piranha, £7.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 33, October 1986 – 88%.
52. **'Bombscare'** by Firebird, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 34 November 1986 – 74%.
53. **'Dandy'** by Electric Dreams, £7.99 from NHCC, Friday 24 October 1986, issue 35, December 1986 – 84%.
54. **'Druid'** by Firebird, £7.95 from NHCC, Friday 24 October 1986, issue 35, December 1986 – *Crash Smash* 90%.

55. **'Olli and Lissa'** by Firebird, £1.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 34, November 1986 – 78%.
56. **'Thanatos'** by Durell, £9.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 35, December 1986 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
57. **'180'** by Mastertronic, £2.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 35, December 1986 – 72%.
58. **'Sacred Armour of Antiriad'** by Palace, £8.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 35, December 1986 – 89%.
59. **'Fairlight II'** by The Edge, £9.95, £3.00 deposit paid on Wednesday 5 November from NHCC. Balance of £6.95 paid on Friday 7 November, issue 36, Christmas Special 1986-87 – 81%.
60. **'Avenger: Way of the Tiger II'** by Gremlin Graphics, £9.95 from NHCC, Monday 17 November, issue 36, Christmas Special 1986-87 – 85%.
61. **'The Music Box'** by Melbourne House, £8.95, £8 deposit paid on Monday 1 December from NHCC. Balance of 95p paid on Tuesday 2 December.
62. **'Space Harrier'** by Elite, £7.99 from NHCC, Saturday 6 December, issue 36, Christmas Special 1986-87 – 77%.
63. **'Uridium'** by Hewson Consultants, £8.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 35, December 1986 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
64. **'The Artist II'** by Softechnics, £14.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 36, Christmas Special 1986-87 – *Crash Smash* (no rating).
65. **'Jewels Of Darkness'** by Rainbird, £14.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 36, Christmas Special 1986-87 – *Crash Smash* 94%.
66. **'Knight Orc'** by Rainbird, £14.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 49, February 1987 – *Crash Smash* 92%.
67. **'Gauntlet'** by U.S.Gold, £8.99 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 37, February 1987 – *Crash Smash* 92%.
68. **'Dracula'** by CRL, £7.95 from NHCC (receipt lost), issue 37, February 1987 – 89%

Full price releases = **45**
 Budget releases = **23**
 Total purchased = **68**
 Total spent = **£476.54**

The full effect of earning more money at both Peachey's and the Co-Op and then starting work at NHCC full-time at the tail end of the year is fully evident in the massive increase of ZX Spectrum titles I paid for with my hard earned pay packets during this year. The bulk of my purchases were made on a Friday and Saturday - Friday being pay day at the Co-Op and Saturday at NHCC. Forty three full price releases were bought including two hefty boxed adventures from Rainbird - *'Knight Orc'* and *'Jewels Of Darkness'* - that retailed at £14.95 each. That was the toppermost premium price for any ZX Spectrum game, rarely did a game cost any more, if ever. Both titles were huge programs, coming on three cassette tapes, and had hefty booklets accompanying them.

I also bought two art package utilities – *'The Art Studio'* and *'The Artist II'* - for the same £14.95 price tag and were purchased nearly a year apart from each other. I had spent almost £60 on four titles! I must have been taking my desire to improve my ZX Spectrum graphic skills seriously from here on in as I was evidently investing in my own development. *'The Art Studio'* came with a thorough manual along with a *'Lenslok'* copy protection device. This was the first time I had bought a software title with one of these devices which was supposed to stop piracy in its tracks. *'Lenslok'* worked by displaying a code on the television screen once the software had completed its loading. The user then set the aperture on the screen to match the width of the *'Lenslok'* – depending how big your television set was. You then looked

through the clear plastic and typed in the letters displayed that had now been de-scrambled to gain access to the program. 'Lenslok' divided public opinion. Some people hated it and couldn't get the device to decode the image on the screen. It didn't help that thousands of copies of Firebird's 'Elite', which also used 'Lenslok', went out to the shops with a 'Lenslok' for a different game in the box. It just didn't work as a 'Lenslok' for one game didn't descramble the code for another. I, personally, never had any trouble using the device with any of the software titles I bought that used it. I did read the instructions though first which probably put me at a bit of an advantage – lots of people didn't. The 'Lenslok' protection device didn't last long though. Peripherals like the 'Multiface' rendered the device useless. All one needed to do was enter the 'Lenslok' code then, once the software had started, press the red button on the 'Multiface'. A copy could then be saved to a blank tape which started at the point the button was pressed. Hey presto! A copy that runs without the hassle of a 'Lenslok'.

'Battle of the Planets' was bought on the strength of the television cartoon that I watched almost every day after school. I had remembered that, originally, the game was supposed to be one of the other titles to use Mikro-Gen's 'Mikro-Plus' interface. The game came in just a normal plastic clam case. No room for an interface then! I soon found out I should have waited for at least one review. The game was boring and as much as I tried I couldn't find much to do while playing it. I remembered the quote in the 'Crash' preview of the game from the boss at Mikro-Gen:

"Battle of the Planets' is a massive, superbly animated arcade shoot-'em-up split into three linked, but separate games. "I would feel happy selling each part of the game separately," Mike told us, "so all three together we see as a real blockbuster".

I never saw THREE parts to the game! I only saw one – the part that looked like a watered down 'Elite' and 'Starstrike'. Where were the other two? I certainly never saw them. What a load of bollocks! Even the two-channel music didn't sound anything like the theme tune from the cartoon series. Another disappointment.

'Zoids' was purchased on the strength of the review 'Crash' magazine had given the game. Issue 22 from November 1985 had featured 'Zoids' on the cover and had featured the first preview of the game. The review itself followed three months later in issue 25 and had heralded the game as one of the best ever written and awarded it 96%, one of the highest overall marks they had ever given a game. I had been in NHCC on Friday 24 January and had seen 'Zoids' running in the shop. I didn't buy it there and then, settling for a mid-range budget game called 'Thunderbirds' by Firebird. That title was the first game to be published in Firebird's new mid-price range of titles. Up to now budget games were £1.99 - £2.50 and full price was around £6 upwards. These 'Super Silver' games retailed at £3.95 each and came in a new style of white plastic clam case. 'Thunderbirds' was loosely based on the television show from the 1960s and I thought it was a great little puzzle game with a, this time, recognisable two channel version of the show's theme tune included.

Evidently having already seen 'Zoids' running hadn't put me off the game as three days later on 27 January I was back at NHCC. In-between I'd been re-reading the 'Crash' review and decided to go for a purchase. Not having the slightest bit of interest in the toys the game was based on I had grown to trust 'Crash' and usually agreed with their opinion. As 'Zoids' had received such a favourable review I thought that it would be a safe and essential purchase to make. Big mistake on my part! After numerous attempts to 'enjoy' myself playing it I concluded that 'Zoids' was horrible. I gave up trying to discover what the object of the game was. I just couldn't work out what I was doing wrong. At first, I was certain it was down to me as 'Crash' had sung its praises to high heaven and back. It didn't even cross my mind at the time that they could possibly have been wrong for once. 'Zoids' soon found itself up on the shelf. Another one gathering dust.

'N.O.M.A.D' was my third Ocean Software purchase. I duly noted that the game had been designed by the same person who had authored 'The Alchemist' by Imagine, Ian Weatherburn, and another fellow called Simon Butler, both of whom I recognised as the team who had written 'The NeverEnding Story' which was my very first Ocean Software purchase the year before.

'ID' had caught my interest as it was a game the like of which I'd never played before. There were no graphics but text only and, programmed inside the computer, was a personality. The object of the game was to talk to this artificial intelligence and eventually get it to trust you. Wholly bizarre at the time the game had been written by Mel Croucher, known for his Automata titles and the previously mentioned grand failure 'Deus Ex Machina'. I liked the ideas that formed 'ID' but the lack of graphics made it a bind to play over long periods of time.

Twenty-one of this year's haul were budget games - and I include 'Max Headroom' and 'Costa Capers' in that total. Both titles had their price reduced in a sale. They'd probably been sitting on the shelf for just a little bit too long and needed getting rid of. I only bought the latter because I had the other three

titles - '*Rasputin*', '*Runestone*' and '*Gerry The Germ*' - in the Firebird 'Hot' range and liked the fetching red boxes they were published in, the only four games ever to use that style of packaging. I wanted the set. I bought '*The Comet Game*' too which was the fifth game in the range. That title though had been released in a normal double jewel tape box so wasn't going to match my previously collected set of four. Evidently those red boxes were too expensive to produce so Firebird started using a cheaper packaging option. I'd quite liked the first four titles but this fifth one was really rubbish and another instant regret. I should have waited for the '*Crash*' review in issue 29 from June 1986 where it was awarded a middling 58% which would have put me off buying it had I'd read it beforehand.

I could take a risk with budget games due to their pocket money prices and would occasionally buy one on the fly when I was bored and fancied trying out something new. The couple of quid they cost meant that, should they prove to be average games, I didn't feel like I'd been conned out of too much money.

This was the year my ZX Spectrum software buying reached its peak. Never again was I to spend that much money on software or buy anywhere near that amount of titles in one year. At the back of my 1986 diary I had kept a record of the then current list of original Spectrum games I had in my possession at the time. The games that had been awarded a *Crash Smash* marked proudly with a * beside them. Some of the titles listed here (like '*Pud Pud In Weird World*', '*Hellfire*', '*Mighty Magus*', '*Star Trader*' and '*Gift from the Gods*') don't show up in my computer shop purchase lists as they were bought from John's Second Hand shop which was on the Kettering Road just round the corner from Adrian's house so I didn't really count them as bona fide purchases. As the year went on, I crossed some of the titles out as I was selling the ones I no longer played or that I thought were crap, to put towards the purchase of new games. Here I have added the publisher of each title though I didn't feel the need to record this in my diary at the time:

Cylu (Firebird)
Fahrenheit 3000 (Firebird)
Exodus (Firebird)
***Booty** (Firebird)
Rasputin (4 screen demo) (Firebird)
Empire Fights Back (Mastertronic)
Hellfire (Melbourne House)
Pud Pud (Ocean)
Decathlon (Ocean)
Roland's Rat Race (Ocean)
***I, Of The Mask** (Electric Dreams)
Blue Max (U.S.Gold)
Zaxxon (U.S.Gold)
***Gunfright** (Ultimate)
NeverEnding Story (Ocean)
Broad Street (Argus Press)
Gift from the Gods (Ocean)
Rasputin (Firebird)
Potty Pigeon (Gremlin Graphics)
Mrs Mopp (Computasolve)
Star Trader (Bug-Byte)
Lone Wolf Flight (Five Ways Software)
Mighty Magus (Melbourne House)
St. Crippens (Creative Sparks)
Art Studio (Rainbird)
***Swords and Sorcery** (PSS)
***Kentilla** (Micromega)
Trashman (New Generation)
Jet Set Willy II (Software Projects)
Wham! – The Music Box (Melbourne House)
Runestone (Firebird)
Specventure (Mastertronic)
Battle Of The Planets (Mikro-Gen)
***Zoids** (Martech)
Thunderbirds (Firebird)
Movie (Pre-production) (Ocean)
Costa Capers (Firebird)

***Movie** (Ocean)
~~**Gerry The Germ**~~ (Firebird)
~~**Fighting Warrior**~~ (Melbourne House)
N.O.M.A.D. (Ocean)
***Jet Set Willy** (Software Projects)
Ad Astra (Gargoyle Games)
~~**Devil's Crown**~~ (Mastertronic)
Space Hunter (Mastertronic)
Sky Fox (Ariolasoft)
***Technician Ted** (Hewson Consultants)
ID (New Wave)
Incredible Shrinking Fireman (Mastertronic)
~~**Amazon Women**~~ (U.S.Gold)
Sinbad (Mastertronic)

In the end I stopped updating the list and scribbled underneath it "This list is completely redundant!" Any games that had been purchased in 1986 after I had written that comment obviously don't feature in the above list.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1986:

Phil Lynott – 4 January.
Hylda Baker – 1 May.
Pat Phoenix – 17 September.
Cary Grant – 29 November.

Chapter 9: 1987

“This new game was called ‘Wizball’” – Ocean Software year one.

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors' –
Chuck Russell, 27 February.
- 'Evil Dead II' – Sam Raimi, 13 March.
- 'Rawhead Rex' – George Pavlou, 17 April.
- 'Platoon' – Oliver Stone, 24 April.
- 'Predator' – John McTiernan, 12 June.
- 'Roxanne' – Fred Schepisi, 19 June.
- 'Robocop' – Paul Verhoeven, 17 July.
- 'Wish You Were Here' – David Leland, 24 July.
- 'Hellraiser' – Clive Barker, 11 September.
- 'Full Metal Jacket' – Stanley Kubrick, 11 September.
- 'Street Trash' – J. Michael Muro, 16 September.
- 'Planes, Trains and Automobiles' – John Hughes, 25 November.
- 'Bad Taste' – Peter Jackson, 11 December.
- 'Rita, Sue and Bob Too' – Alan Clarke.

On Friday 2 January a letter popped through the post box at Longland Road with a familiar blue logo on it. I had just received a communication from Gary Bracey at Ocean Software, one of the companies I had sent my Spectrum graphics demo to. I had given up hope of hearing back from anyone else after receiving my two rejection letters from software houses that didn't develop games in-house and the letter from Elite that didn't make any sense. I took no hesitation in opening it immediately. The letter stated that I was being offered the possibility of a graphics job but Gary would only be taking people on to work in-house. I had to move to Manchester if I wanted to take this any further. I had thought that maybe I could work from home and I hadn't really thought about moving away in order to gain my dream job. That letter from Gary, the one that was about to change my life, read:

“30th December 1986

Dear Mark,

Many thanks for your submission in reply to our advertisement for graphic designers. I was most impressed with your work but before I am able to pursue this any further I must clarify something with you.

From previous experience, we have found that freelance graphic work poses some problems for us in respect of co-ordination and communication between artist and programmer. To elaborate, if we have a programmer working on a project in-house who is supplied with graphics by someone freelance living a fair distance away then collaboration proves to be rather difficult and time is lost due to misunderstandings and lack of feedback.

I have come to the conclusion that the only way to obviate this situation is to employ artists on an in-house basis only. This would mean that re-location to Manchester must be considered and in return we would offer the security of a good regular salary (with possible bonuses) and assistance in finding accommodation.

As I initially mentioned I am most impressed with your abilities and if you are still interested in the position as outlined above then I would like to hear from you further.

Thank you once again for your submission and I enclose your cassette. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

Gary Bracey
Software Manager
Ocean Software Limited"

I thought long and hard about it over the weekend and on the following Monday morning spoke to Gary on the phone and decided it was just too good an opportunity to pass up. I took the plunge and replied with a "Yes please". "Are you available to come up and see us on Thursday?" asked Gary during the resultant phone conversation. You bet I was.

Three days after receiving my letter, on Thursday 8 January, me and my Mum woke up around half six, had a morning coffee and got the first train after nine (as it's cheaper after the rush hour) from Northampton to the city of Manchester. The weather was freezing, the remnants of a recent covering of snow from a few days before was now melting and turning to slush. I'd not really been out of my hometown on my own before other than on school trips and the lorry drive to Italy with Bob. I had also never been on my own on a train before. So, it was down to Mum to come along with me for moral support. It would have just been too terrifying for me to have gone through this day on my own. A change of trains at Rugby and then Crewe was necessary in order to reach our destination and we arrived in Manchester approximately three hours later. We came out of Piccadilly Station and followed the directions on foot that Gary had given us to get to the Ocean building situated at 6 Central Street. Upon arrival we walked up to the third floor to Ocean's reception area, complete with a palm tree in a vase, and I informed the receptionist who I was and why I was there. She picked up the phone and pressed in a three-digit number: "Hi Gary, I've got Mark Jones here to see you". A short pause was followed by "Just make your way back down to where you came into the door on its right. Someone will be there to let you in". Back down the stairs we went and there a chap, who it turns out was Lee Cowley, opened the heavy locked door and let us in. For the first time I entered the 'dungeons' of Ocean Software and wondered what on earth I was letting myself in for. I was terribly excited and so very nervous at the same time. Down in the programming area there was very little natural light, just tiny windows at the top of each cordoned off room which, on the other side, were level with the pavement outside. If you looked up at the windows you could just see people's legs as they walked by. There were game tapes, magazines, joysticks, wires, power supplies, paperwork and computers piled about everywhere and the place permeated with the aroma of coffee and stale cigarette smoke. No one had thought to tidy up in preparation for our arrival then! A constant background noise consisting of people talking, the tapping of keys, computer music and doors slamming reverberated around the place. We sat down in Gary Bracey's office and he arranged for someone to make myself and Mum a cup of tea. Gary put us at ease and talked to us about what went on at Ocean Software, how it went on, what times it went on and what money I would be getting each week for getting it on. We then were given a short tour around the place and I felt truly honored to see games being worked on that I'd only, so far, read about in the magazines. I saw, among others, '*Short Circuit*' on the ZX Spectrum and '*Arkanoid*' on the Commodore 64. These weren't even finished yet and I was being shown them actually working. This was the very first time I'd seen unfinished commercial games while they were still a work-in-progress. These were games that people were going to be buying in a few months once they'd been finished, mastered and mass produced. I couldn't wait to tell my mates. We had another quick chat in Gary's office when he officially offered me the job, we shook our hands, he thanked us for coming and said he'd wait to hear from me. As I left I recall being pretty chuffed that I'd just been offered a possible £120 a week for doing what I'd been doing after school in my spare time for fun (the wage worked out a paltry, by today's standards, £6,240 a year!) At that time, £120 seemed like a lot of money. I was only 16 years old and a possible move away from home to a city I had only just visited to do an amazing job was now a distinct possibility. Me and Mum discussed what had just happened on the way home and by the time we got back to Northampton I'd decided I had to give it a go. I rang up the next day (on 0161 832 6633, a phone number I've never forgotten) and accepted Gary's job offer. I spent the next couple of weeks counting down the days and going through every single possible eventuality, positive and negative.

First though, let's have a look at what exactly the issue was that Gary was referring to in the letter I received from him. In it he said:

"I have come to the conclusion that the only way to obviate this situation is to employ artists on an in-house basis only."

So, he was taking on more in-house artists but didn't want any more freelancers. Why? Unbeknownst to me and most of the general public Ocean there was a huge increase in film licensing and arcade conversions, but they just didn't have the in-house staff to deal with the workload that presented. As such their games were being farmed out to out-of-house programming teams and some of them either weren't up to the task

or just took the mickey and worked at a painfully slow rate, fobbing Ocean off in regard to how well progress was going. The result of this was that the games just weren't completed as and when they should have been and when they were they were, more often than not, crap. This ended up with many annoyed computer games players who'd be scouring the shops for titles that weren't even half finished yet. Frustrated by this they were then writing into the magazines complaining about Ocean Software's advertising policy and the non-availability of games that had spent the last six to twelve months being advertised in their very pages. To demonstrate the quality of Ocean's output during this period here's some of the review percentages Ocean and Imagine were getting in 'Crash' during this period from mid-1986 up to mid-1987 for their ZX Spectrum output (so I'm going to jump ahead a little in the timeline now temporarily). It illustrates the extent of the problem at the time:

The good (85% or above):

- '**Batman**' – issue 28, May 1986 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
 - '**Green Beret**' – issue 28, May 1986 – 88%.
 - '**Ping Pong**' – issue 28, May 1986 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
 - '**Superbowl**' – issue 29, June 1986 – 85%.
 - '**Hunchback the Adventure**' – issue 33, October 1986 – 86%.
 - '**Cobra**' – issue 35, December 1986 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
 - '**The Great Escape**' – issue 35, December 1986 – *Crash Smash* 96%.
 - '**Top Gun**' – issue 37, February 1987 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
 - '**Head Over Heels**' – issue 38, April 1987 – *Crash Smash* 97%.
 - '**Tai Pan**' – issue 43, August 1987 – *Crash Smash* 93%.
- Proof here that Ocean were still capable of getting it right. On occasion.

The middling (between 70%-84%):

- '**V**' – issue 28, May 1986 – 70%.
 - '**Nightmare Rally**' – issue 34, November 1986 – 80%.
 - '**Double Take**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 74%.
 - '**Terra Cresta**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 81%.
 - '**Short Circuit**' – issue 40, May 1987 – 71%.
 - '**Slap Fight**' – issue 43, August 1987 – 72%.
- Okay-ish games, some with some nice graphics and good game play features but which I could take or leave. I worked by the rule that anything that got 70% or over would be worth trying out. So I can't really call these games bad, though in the main they were nothing special.

The bad (69% or below):

- '**Knight Rider**' – issue 33, October 1986 – 39%.
 - '**Konami's Tennis**' – issue 33, October 1986 – 60%.
 - '**Street Hawk**' – issue 34, November 1986 – 68%.
 - '**Galivan**' – issue 35, December 1986 – 65%.
 - '**Mailstrom**' – issue 35, December 1986 – 59%.
 - '**Miami Vice**' – issue 35, December 1986 – 27%.
 - '**Donkey Kong**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 48%.
 - '**Highlander**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 57%.
 - '**It's a Knockout**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 39%.
 - '**Konami's Golf**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 58%.
 - '**Legends of Kage**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 50%.
 - '**Super Soccer**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 56%.
 - '**Yie Ar Kung Fu II**' – issue 37, February 1987 – 38%.
 - '**Arkanoid**' – issue 38, April 1987 – 59% (the only poor review I, and many others, disagreed with).
 - '**Army Moves**' – issue 41, June 1987 – 54%.
 - '**Mario Bros**' – issue 41, June 1987 – 45%.
 - '**Mag Max**' – issue 42, July 1987 – 42%.
 - '**Mutants**' – issue 43, August 1987 – 58%.
- Most of the these (bar 'Arkanoid' – more of that later) I thought were fair reviews and agreed with what had been written in 'Crash' about them. They were, in the main, cack!

Ocean Software went through at least four distinct periods. Period one was the very early days of the company that brought us classic early titles like 'Moon Alert', 'Pogo', 'Hunchback', 'Daley Thompson's

Decathlon, *Kong Strikes Back*, *Hunchback II*, *Mikie* and *Hyper Sports* (I include titles that came out under the Imagine Software label with these as they all came out the same building and were written by the same teams that made the games that were released under the Ocean label). That, for me as a schoolboy gamer, is the era I look back on most fondly. Then something went wrong and we arrive at this hit and miss 1986 to mid-1987 period where the quality, more often than not, dives and lots of Ocean games were massively delayed and were sometimes advertised for almost a whole year before being actually finished and released. I realised, later on, that Gary was expanding their in-house team to halt any re-occurrence of the *'Super Bowl'*/*'Street Hawk'*/*'Knight Rider'* scenario that Ocean Software had just been through in the summer just gone. Then, as the company sought to rectify this, we enter period three (which is where myself and most of my future work mates came in). More titles are worked on in-house and the company enters what many call their 'golden period' from mid-1987 right up to the early 1990s. A lot of new staff started around the first few months of 1987 but obviously the games we'd been assigned to wouldn't be finished and ready for release until the middle of that year at the earliest. Once those titles started to slowly filter out to the shops then Ocean start earning the many 'Software House of the Year' awards from various magazines and, for a good while, no other games company could really touch us. So, the plan Gary had put in place had actually worked! The move to 16-bit seems to go quite well with Ocean still releasing 'A' grade titles for the Amiga and Atari ST. Then, at the start of the 90s, they start to lose their way again by not managing the move over to the console market properly which resulted in even more staff being employed, much bigger teams being assigned to each title, much longer development times, no product out on the shelves that brought in revenue and more projects being canceled before completion which inevitably meant there was no return on the work already completed. I count myself lucky that I wasn't there for any of that! But anyway, I digress.

On the night of Sunday the 18 January 1987 the weather was cold and windy and, by the time we got to where we were going, darkness had settled in for the night. I found myself holed up in the dank 'New Manx Hotel' on the Palatine Road in the Didsbury area of south Manchester. The place has long since been demolished as I discovered when I went to look for it after moving back to Manchester in 2002. All I remember about it was that the building was a big, dark looking place. My parents had driven me up in the family car, saw me in, settled me down and then set off on the journey back home without me. I was left to my own devices and found myself all alone. All I had was a bag of clothes, my ZX Spectrum 128k, my prized collection of *'Crash'* magazines and my ever-shortening fingernails (and they still haven't recovered from that night!) If I hadn't had my computer and *'Crash'* collection with me I think I would have gone home on the first train that night as, after my parents had left, I ended up getting rather upset. I was in a strange town where I didn't know anyone, in a strange hotel and also had the added nerves from starting a brand-new job the next day. I don't think I'd ever been so scared in my entire life. An interesting fact that I learnt many years later, right near where the hotel was situated and on the same road, was what would have then been the Factory Records head office, ran by music supremo Anthony Wilson.

Monday morning came quickly and I got dressed and went downstairs for the cooked breakfast that was already included in the hotel bill that Ocean were taking care of. I ordered a large plate of a bit of everything on offer and ate and ate until I was stuffed as I hadn't had much to eat the night before. Then, as it got nearer the time to leave for my first day my nerves came back. I got on the bus to take me into the city centre where the only room to sit was upstairs. Back then downstairs was non-smoking and upstairs was where passengers were allowed to smoke. The bus was already filling up with smoking students. I got more nervous as I got nearer town. I thought back to my breakfast. The upper deck was filling up with fag smoke. The windows were shut as it was mid-winter. I started to feel very ill. I thought for a second, I was going to be tasting my breakfast again, along with the lining of my stomach and everyone on the bus was also going to be seeing what it had consisted of! I jumped off the bus early near the University and held my mouth tightly closed just in case there was an unwanted eruption. I had turned a deathly white colour. I had to stand still for a while as I waited until the dizziness had gone and took a deep breath of fresh cold air. I started to feel better but by this time it was already 9:20am. I was due in work, on my first day, in ten minutes time. I was at least twenty minutes' walk away. Hardly a good start to my new job as I wanted to make a good impression and I hated being late for anything. I walked the rest of the way into town and ended up arriving late. I had a definite sweat on, not only from the hurried walking I'd been doing but I was also petrified I was going to get a bollocking. I explained what had happened to Gary and Lee Cowley, who had been assigned to look after Ocean Software's newest recruit and settle him in. Instead of getting a telling off they both just shrugged their shoulders and carried on. Little did I realise just what a relaxed working environment Ocean Software was. Nobody blinked an eye that I was just over ten minutes late.

Lee worked, mainly, in Gary's office and appeared to do everything from opening post, looking at the demos sent in from possible new employees, testing the possible faulty games sent in for the attention of the mythical 'Mr. Yates', bug testing the new games currently being created and a whole host of other

tasks. Lee told me he was the one who had seen the ZX Spectrum demo tape I had sent in and had mentioned to Gary that I'd be worth getting in and interviewing about a possible job. Lee sorted me out with a ZX Spectrum +2 machine and a working Interface One and Microdrive unit in order to save the coming months work on. Luckily that Microdrive unit turned out to be a pretty reliable unit so the numerous accounts from Microdrive users of work being lost due to malfunctioning drives didn't happen to me.

As I was on my first day there wasn't a programmer sitting there ready to commence work with me. I had to wait until one of the Z80 programmers became free and I would be paired with whoever was up next. Until then I was to be found odd bits that needed doing. The artists already working on full games were beavering away on their current projects and I would be used to tidy up various things and do some bits and bobs. The very first task I was given was to design a loading screen for an educational program on the ZX Spectrum called 'Say No to Strangers' for the Thetford Crime Prevention Panel - hardly the most glamorous or exciting of starts. In fact, it was such a dull non-event for me I had forgotten that I'd actually had anything to do with it until I came across the screen again many years later when my work Microdrives were salvaged and preserved. The resulting loading screen looked very amateurish, mainly due to the fact I didn't use any reference material for it and just drew it straight from my head on to the Spectrum screen. The use of attributes was nothing to shout out about either, with just simple blocks of colour added in as an after-thought. The screen showed a possible pedophile (a word I'd never heard of back then. People like that were just known as perverts or 'kiddy fiddlers') trying to entice two youngsters into his car. Visible on the screen are a few Ocean references. I'd called the street 'Central St' and put a poster on a lamp post saying, 'Ocean Are Fab!' I have no idea how Ocean had become involved in this project and when I actually saw the program itself in for the first time in 2011 - I was amazed at finding it preserved on the 'World of Spectrum' and 'Spectrum Computing' websites - I was completely underwhelmed. The whole thing had been written in BASIC by Stephen P. Blades (the only ZX Spectrum title he ever wrote) and wasn't anything that could have been sold commercially. It wasn't even good enough to be a budget title. All the program did was draw some crude background graphics using PRINT and PLOT commands (which actually took longer to draw than it did to take part in the 'game') and then puts you in a grand total of four different scenarios to which you have to respond and tell the computer what you are going to do next. Among the choices given were:

R = RUN
S = SCREAM
N = SAY NO
T = TELL POLICE
TEACHER
PARENT
Y = SAY YES

It looked like the sort of program you could have typed in from 'Sinclair User' back in 1983. Steve Blower in the Ocean art department put together a quick black and white inlay for the title but had mistakenly titled it 'Never Go with Strangers'. That's not it's title in the program or on the loading screen I'd drawn!

My next task, again assigned to me by Gary, was to alter the name of a game on its already finished loading screen. The rights to Konami's arcade game 'Hyper Rally' had been bought over a year ago by Ocean yet the game still hadn't been advertised, nor had any artwork been produced for it, let alone released. 'Crash' had mentioned the game in its 'Merely Mangram' news section way back in issue 18 from July 1985 (on page 9) as a recently acquired arcade license. 'Sinclair User' had also printed that Imagine had acquired the license, along with 'Hyper Sports', 'Konami's Tennis', 'Konami's Golf' and 'Yie Ar Kung Fu' in issue 40 from the same date (on page 7). We were now in February 1987, a whole year and seven months later! What was required of me was to remove the words 'Hyper Rally' from the loading screen and replace them with the new title, which was going to be, and whoever thought of it must have taken at least ten seconds to think it up, 'Road Race'. This was their long overdue conversion which, evidently, had been deemed too poor quality and too late to release as a standalone title by Ocean bosses. Had it been released at the time it would have retailed at £7.95 and I don't think any games players would have been too pleased to have shelled out that much for what was shown to me running on my ZX Spectrum that day. This is what the programmer had spent the last 18 months working on? It looked dated by 1987s standards and I didn't think it was much fun to play either. I noted a distinct lack of speed which obviously wasn't very good if you were supposed to be racing at many miles an hour! Ocean had obviously sorted out another way of raking back some of the money spent on the development of the game by selling it to 'Your Sinclair' magazine who were planning on putting it on a tape to be affixed to the front of one of their future issues. I removed the 'Hyper Rally' title from the screen, replaced it with 'ROAD RACE' and added 'AN EASTER

GIFT FROM OCEAN' above it. The already drawn screen was a direct copy of the cover art for the MSX version of *'Hyper Rally'* that had been released in 1985. Anyone who was familiar with that version would have recognised the origins of the game straight away should they have seen the loading screen. As I was amending someone else's work obviously I wasn't going to sign it. Someone called SHEIK had drawn the *'Hyper Rally'* screen and he'd written his name on it, as was his right to do so. Instead, and so that if any of my mates didn't believe me when I told them I'd had a hand in the *'Road Race'* loading screen, I added *'LETTERING BY MARK R. JONES'* in the spare bit of space on the road on the bottom left-hand corner of the screen then covered it in white paper and white ink so it was only visible when the attributes had been removed. That way, no one could call me a liar. The proof was there should anyone want to investigate or question my inevitable boasts.

'Road Race' finally saw the light of day on the cover of the May 1987 edition of *'Your Sinclair'*. The magazine devoted the front cover to it and also used the illustration they themselves had produced as the pull-out centre page poster. Of course, there was no mention in the magazine of *'Hyper Rally'*, or the fact that this was a game Ocean had deemed not worthy of a proper release and hence, in reality, was an Ocean reject. By all accounts the game went down rather well as a freebie and didn't do *'Your Sinclair'* or Ocean Software any harm whatsoever. Had the game actually been released as a full price title then I dare say a different story would have followed.

One of the things that made getting a job at Ocean Software so exciting for me was that when I was 14/15 years old a few years back and I'd read a magazine article about a programmer or artist who'd just completed and had their new game released I was in awe. These people were, to me, nearly as famous as pop and film stars! They managed to create these new games that could take you to all sorts of places just by typing things into a computer. Now here I was sitting next to them, talking to them while I made brews, being mates with them and, of course, working with them. Eventually, I'm not sure how long this actually took to happen, but it did, I turned into one of them. It was totally bizarre. Writers from the magazines I'd bought and read religiously were soon going to be coming in to speak to me, ask me questions about the new games I was involved with and that would then be printed in their magazines and read by games players who were now in the position I used to be in. It was a totally bizarre situation I found myself in.

During one of my very first lunch breaks out with fellow Ocean staff I had tasted chips and gravy for the first time, something unheard of in my hometown of Northampton. I had experienced this northern delicacy in the Fish and Chips Restaurant and Take Away a few yards up from the Odyssey 7 Magazine and Poster Centre on the Hanging Ditch. I remember the combination sounded completely alien to me at the time and it might as well have been suggested I have chips and ice cream. The takeaway we ate in doesn't exist anymore. Sinclair's Oyster Bar now sits on the site having been moved 300 metres away brick by brick during redevelopment of the area in 1998.

At the end of my first week Gary Bracey asked me to produce a loading screen for *'Mag Max'* on the ZX Spectrum. The title was a conversion of an arcade game by Nichibutsu from 1985 and was coming out on the Imagine label. "Wow!", I thought, "I've seen that game advertised in the magazines for quite a while! If I do this well this is going to be seen on TV screens up and down the country! I've got to make sure this is really good." - something meaty, something to do with a real game with proper artwork, a real arcade conversion, something that games players are going to be able to look at while the game loads, something that I drew myself. At this point in time I hadn't seen *'Mag Max'* running yet either as an arcade game or on a ZX Spectrum so I had no idea what the game was actually like. The only thing I was certain of was that I had to impress everyone with this. This was what I was here for. I'd done many static screens on the ZX Spectrum before but I'd never really finished any of them, not properly. I had usually become bored three quarters of the way through most of my screens and abandoned them, unfinished. This was the real deal and had to be, most definitely, the best piece of work I'd ever done. To say it was daunting for me was a bit of an understatement. I got started on it by sourcing a copy of the striking Bob Wakelin artwork that he'd produced for the game. The advert I had managed to find only contained an amended version of the illustration that had reused blocks of it in a 'trendy 80s' type of way. I didn't want to do that for my screen so I had a root around the stored magazines held in the racks in 'Arcade Alley' and found an advert that contained an unaltered version of the art. Once that was in my hands I loaded up *'Melbourne Draw'* (and also used *'Art Studio'* and *'The Artist II'* as they all did odd bits better than the other. I always ended up switching between all three while drawing a loading screen to take advantage of each program's strengths) and made a start. The other artists at Ocean were keeping an eye on my progress, checking me out, working out how good or bad I was, weighing me up. This was my baptism of fire, the piece of work I was going to be judged on. The loading screen for *'Mag Max'* couldn't be anything other than brilliant and it was the only time I ever felt any real pressure at Ocean. I work well under pressure but once I'd got started on the screen I was on a roll. Hours and hours would pass and I'd not even realise. During my dinner hour I'd sit looking at sections of the screen at five times magnification while eating my sandwiches and cheese and

onion crisps then get going again as soon as I had finished them off.

Every couple of hours I'd get up and have a little wander about to see what everyone else was doing, have a little chat, then come back to the screen and there'd be something obvious glaring me in the face. "Tsk! I need to change that!" I'd think and would change a few pixels to improve it. A short break away from the screen always helped. If I was having a problem getting something to look how I wanted and things weren't going to plan I'd walk away, come back and, nine times out of ten, the problem would be staring me in the face. The only major change I had to make was that I straightened the main character's right arm. In the original illustration it's at a diagonal angle. I figured that by straightening the arm it would make dealing with the ZX Spectrum's attribute boundaries a lot easier, which it did. The finished screen took me about three days to complete in all. I probably spent the last two hours changing a pixel here and a pixel there. I gave it a good long look over once completed and I was elated to realise it was easily the best piece of ZX Spectrum work I'd done so far.

My *'Mag Max'* loading screen got the thumbs up from everyone downstairs. I'd passed the test! My creation exceeded the required standard and I now felt like part of the team! Then, on the request of Gary again, I immediately started work on producing the Amstrad CPC loading screen for the same game. That caused me a few problems at first as I'd never used an Amstrad CPC let alone produced any graphics using proper coloured pixels before, being used to the ZX Spectrum's two colours per eight by eight-character square colouring facility. Not only that but I had to learn to use an art package I'd never touched before, something that normally takes many days of practicing to do. The Amstrad loading screen for *'Mag Max'* took quite a bit longer than the ZX Spectrum equivalent, but it turned out okay in the end and certainly wasn't anything to be embarrassed about considering it was my very first loading screen on the machine.

There was I thinking I was now done with *'Mag Max'* and itching to start on my first full game Gary then approached me to change some of the graphics in the ZX Spectrum *'Mag Max'* game itself. The main character was a bit on the tiny side on both machines and looked a little like those old user defined graphics you used to get in magazine listings. It looked a little dated. I had a typed-up letter from the programmer of *'Mag Max'*, Gary Knight, that listed the character sizes required and started work on my very first animation. I'd never animated anything before except for that 3D head I'd made in *'VU-3D'* a few years previously. I had to draw a robot head, a ship and animate a set of robot legs and, once finished, realised that I had managed to improve on the original graphics. Another artist, sat round the corner to me, was assigned the task of doing the same for the Amstrad CPC character graphics as they weren't up to scratch in the current version either.

During those early months at Ocean, during a lunch break, I ventured to a chemist near the cinema on Oxford Road. To my surprise I saw Eric Sykes (radio, stage, television and film writer, comedian, actor and director whose career spanned more than fifty years) browsing the shelves. I couldn't believe it. He was someone I'd seen on the television all through my youth and was famous before I was even born. You rarely saw famous people in the street in Northampton but as I was in the vicinity of the BBC's Manchester base it's hardly surprising that this would happen on occasion. It so caught me unawares as I wasn't used to seeing people I had seen on the television going about their normal day to day business. Later on, I also glanced upon, by chance, David Bowie leaving the Midland Hotel which was situated literally outside Ocean. He played *Maine Road* on Tuesday 14 July 1987 so I presume it was then. I saw members of The Rolling Stones leaving the same hotel on another lunch break. They played the same venue as Bowie on Saturday 21 July 1990 so that was a bit later and had obviously arrived on the Friday before (as I was rarely in Manchester on Saturdays). I can't recall which members of the band I saw other than Ronnie Wood but it all happened very quickly and in a flurry of multicoloured 80s pop star cloaks that were swirling around each band member, obscuring who the wearer was, but there was at least four of them. Easiest of all though was accidentally spotting members of the *'Coronation Street'* cast. The Granada studio where it was filmed was situated slap bang in the middle of the Manchester city centre and I recall walking to Victoria Station in 1988 with Ocean musician Jonathan Dunn to get a train to Chorley and seeing Roy Barraclough, who was then playing Alec Gilroy, in an open topped car waiting for traffic lights to change. I said to Jon, too loudly as it happened, "Look! There's Alec Gilroy" and Roy heard me and gave me a dirty look! It became quite common for someone to come back to work after popping into town for their dinner and say that they'd stood next to Ken, Deirdre, Rita, Jack, Vera or Percy Sugden while queuing up for their sarnie, drink and packet of crisps. Another time I had left the flat I was living in with Bill Harbison one morning and joined the queue for the bus into town and there at the bus stop was Nursie from *'Blackadder'* (actress Patsy Byrne) getting the bus just like me. That never happened in Northampton!

Another time I was, again, on my lunch and was walking up to a secondhand record shop just up Oxford Road past the BBC. As I approached the BBC building I saw hundreds and hundreds of people standing in the road and wondered what was going on. As I got closer I could see some figures on the roof of the building. I could hear screaming. What was it? Had there been a bomb scare? Germ warfare? When I got

near it soon became apparent to me that the people screaming were teenage girls and the figures on the roof were the then current pop trio Bros. Just as I walked past they were recreating their logo (made to represent the three band members) with their own bodies up on the roof while the girls waved, screamed, cried and probably pissed themselves on the pavement below. By the time I walked back everyone had gone and peace prevailed.

During those first weeks at Ocean I had to pinch myself some mornings. While *'Mag Max'* wasn't a fantastic title it didn't really matter to me. I was working on a game that was going to be published. People were going to be able to buy it in the shops. This was amazing to me. Thankfully the task of coming up with a new main graphic for *'Mag Max'* didn't take all that long. Once finished and in the game the replacement graphics looked okay given the size constraints I was working in and were a lot better than the ones that had been there previously. *'Mag Max'* was a pretty poor game though. We knew it. We were all games players at Ocean. We knew the difference between a good game and a bad game. *'Mag Max'* wasn't going to cause any great shakes once it had been released. It had to go out though and get published. Obviously Ocean had paid for this game to be written and it needed to be released so that they could claw back at least some of the money spent on the license and development and so that the newer projects sitting in the pipeline could be gotten on with.

One evening, while still holed up in that dark and lonely hotel, I was messing about on Melbourne House's *'Wham! The Music Box'* utility on my ZX Spectrum and, to relieve the boredom I was experiencing, set about converting some music from the arcade version of *'Arkanoid'* on to the machine. I'd heard all three in-game tunes playing almost every day at work as the ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 conversions were being worked on down the corridor from me. I knew them off by heart. I thought it might be nice to try and do a decent two channel ZX Spectrum version. It only took an hour or so of fiddling about and they were done. The tunes turned out quite nicely so I went into work the next day and played them to Mike Lamb, the ZX Spectrum coder for *'Arkanoid'*. He liked what he heard and straight away said he'd like to put them in the game. So, I gave him a copy of the three files and in they went. Ronnie Fowles, the artist, even gave me a little credit for the tunes on the loading screen that he drew for *'Arkanoid'*. I was well chuffed and had another game set to go out with my name on. (https://youtu.be/i_FlinBl6ck)

It wasn't long before my first proper project began. A completely original game was being developed out-of-house by some folks called Sensible Software on the Commodore 64. I'd not heard of them before; they were Commodore only guys so I had no reason to. I did find out later they had written a ZX Spectrum game I'd played called *'Twister: Mother of Charlotte'* for System 3 in 1986 (gaining an okay 71% in Crash issue 25 from March 1986) but they hadn't thought of the Sensible Software name back then so I didn't make the connection. The year before they'd also written a game for Ocean called *'Parallax'* that had been well received but as it had only been released on the Commodore 64, there being no ZX Spectrum conversion, I'd not played it. Gary Bracey had loved the early working version that had been sent to him of their new game and set about getting a ZX Spectrum translation developed almost alongside the Commodore 64 version. Due to there not being an Amstrad programmer free this conversion went to an out-of-house developer, surely, judging by the resultant game, a decision Gary was to later regret. This new game was called *'Wizball'*.

I was moved from my current desk in the first open area of the dungeons into a little room on the other side of the cellars and was teamed up with a chap called Steve Watson. He was a newly employed programmer, having started the other side of Christmas just gone, and had previously written a game published by The Edge called *'Psi Chess'* for the Spectrum. The game had been given a *'Sinclair User Classic'* in issue 54 from September 1986 and 8/10 in *'Your Sinclair'*, issue 10 from October 1986. It was quite a good chess game according to the reviews. Steve was an odd fellow though he wasn't in anyway unpleasant. Initially we got on fine, he could be quite funny sometimes with his dry sense of humour. He didn't smell, he didn't smoke lots - which could be annoying to a non-smoker in the little shut off rooms in the basement - and things appeared to be going well at first. He did freak me out a little with his wispy beard and long hair which earned him his *'Catweazle'* nickname amongst the staff downstairs. I'd not really met a real-life hippy before and here I was now working with one.

My very first task on *'Wizball'* was to get the main character drawn and animating in rotation through sixteen frames which, looking back, was an awful lot of frames for one character to use in a game for the ZX Spectrum. This was proving to be harder to pull off than I'd imagined. After hours of work my first attempt had to be scrapped completely as I'd drawn it as a line graphic, black ink on white paper and the inside of the *'Wizball'* was hollow. If that had been put on to a black screen then *'Wizball'* would look the same colour as the background. I had to set my paper to black and draw in white ink on the computer screen in order for it to look as it should once it had been placed in the game. I'd done very little animation work up to now, there was none featured in the demo tape I'd sent to Ocean to get the job, and I remember getting quite a bit of help from another artist called Simon Butler who had just started as a full-time in-house

Ocean employee about three weeks after me. Simon had been doing this kind of work for a few years already having started his computer graphic career at the original Imagine in Liverpool (working on the BBC version of a game called *'Pedro'*), then moved on to Denton Designs and Canvas. Simon was always willing to help anyone out at Ocean should they need his expertise and experience.

I already was well aware of who Simon Butler was. I'd played his games back home while I was a schoolboy. I'd bought, with real money, *'The NeverEnding Story'*, *'Cosmic Wartoad'* and *'N.O.M.A.D.'* on the Spectrum, all games Simon had produced the graphics for. To me Simon was a computer game celebrity. And here he was, right in front of me, helping me out with my work in my new job. We became good buddies. It also helped that Simon can be very, very funny. He's a scouser and I love the scouse sense of humour. I'm a massive Beatles fan remember and I'm a fan of The Beatles' humour as much as their music. Simon helped me so much while I was at Ocean. He's a few years older than me and I'd just left school and just happened to be the youngest member of the Ocean team at the time so I probably needed some looking after, some reigning in sometimes and guidance. I started again on the main *'Wizball'* graphic and this second attempt was perfected and used, after about a week of changing a pixel here and a pixel there, in the finished game. I'd never spent that amount of time on a tiny sixteen by sixteen-pixel graphic before. Come to think of it, I hadn't even drawn a sixteen by sixteen-pixel graphic before, let alone animated one through sixteen frames! I had added another string to my bow.

In order to draw and animate sprites on the ZX Spectrum some of Ocean's in-house programmers, mainly Joffa and Paul Owens, had amended *'Melbourne Draw'*, a commercial drawing package from 1983 by Melbourne House, to enable you to do so. They had written some extra features not featured in the released version to extend its capabilities so that you could grab part of the screen, store it in memory, then place them on top of each other at varying speeds so you were able to see if it looked right animating. This expanded version was renamed *'Ocean Draw'*. This program may have disappeared forever had I not kept the copy I had over the years and was salvaged from one of my old Microdrives many years later. *'Ocean Draw'* was definitely used to draw the animated sprites used in the Spectrum version of games like *'Short Circuit'*, *'Wizball'*, *'Arkanoid'*, *'Athena'*, *'Gryzor'*, *'Arkanoid II – Revenge of Doh'*, *'Vindicator'* and others. Later on it was expanded even more to include a map editor by Mike Lamb (thus the name of that version being *'Mike's Map Editor'*). This iteration of the program was used to create the maps in *'Renegade'*, *'Gryzor'*, *'Target: Renegade'* and the scrolly, shoot 'em up section in *'The Vindicator'* (and others, probably). If you so wish you can download these rare Ocean utilities here to try on a real Spectrum or emulator: <https://tinyurl.com/2p96wjbz>. A video, narrated by myself and showing *'Ocean Draw'* running (sort of, even though I have a copy of the instructions, I still can't remember fully how to use all its features), is on-line here: https://youtu.be/289mF5XO_I0

A few weeks before I started my own employment at Ocean another graphic artist, also called Mark Jones, had joined the team downstairs in the basement. His first project, which I saw him working on during the day I visited for my interview, was *'Arkanoid'* on the Commodore 64, though Mark's pre-professional work and the demo he'd sent to Ocean had been for the Amstrad CPC machine. He was a little bit older than me and didn't have the same middle name so we used that to differentiate between us both to save any possible confusion in the future. His initial was K and mine was R. At work we were soon referred to as Mark Jones 'Junior' (me) and Mark Jones 'Senior' (him). It made group conversations easier too. Instead of people calling out for "Mark" they'd say "Senior" or "Junior". For any credits we received for the work we did on computer games, on the inlays, loading screens or in-game, we used the K or R initial and while we stuck to that people still get confused as to who did what. Every few months I still, even to this day, receive a message congratulating me on the graphics work the other Mark did. I then have to explain, again, that they've got the wrong Mark. "No, that's Mark with a 'K', I'm Mark with an 'R'".

Gary had started to prompt me about finding somewhere to live. Ocean weren't going to pay for me to stay in a hotel indefinitely and I had to start looking for somewhere more permanent to stay. A suggestion was made that we two Mark Jones's would benefit financially by co-habiting. I hadn't got a clue how to look for a flat, I'd never done it before. Mark, being a bit older than me, was a bit more world-wise so took the lead and one afternoon Mark 'Senior' and I found ourselves at an estate agents in Didsbury on the hunt for a place to call home. We both said yes to the first place we found, a flat in the middle of a block of three on Sunnybank Avenue in Heaton Mersey, Stockport. We didn't agree to it because it was a palace or anything. We just wanted to get the flat search over with and this place looked liveable and wasn't far from a bus stop that took us straight into town. Inevitably, we ended up having to ask anyone who may have sent either of us any post to put the middle initial on the envelope so that we weren't opening each other's letters by accident too.

Once Mike and Ronnie had finished *'Arkanoid'* on the ZX Spectrum the code was taken to be mastered at Ablex and, not long after, the game sat on the shelves at various computer game shops up and down the country ready and waiting to be bought. This was hugely important to me still as it was only

the second time that any work I'd done had been commercially released. People I'd been to school with and many games players up and down the country who'd bought (or got copies of) *'Arkanoid'* would see my name on their computer screens in their own homes as the game loaded into their computers as I had that credit on the game's loading screen courtesy of Ronnie. I was, again, very excited by the prospect.

One morning, just after *'Arkanoid'* had been put to bed, I was sat at my desk twiddling with Spectrum pixels and Gary appeared and stated to everyone within ear shot "I've got the new Ultimate game!" Obviously, everybody's ears pricked up. No one was expecting there to be any new Ultimate release. There had been no adverts or write ups in the preview sections of the magazines for any forthcoming title. Straight away a free ZX Spectrum was located and the tape loaded up. There was no loading screen, which was a bit of a disappointment, but when the game had finished loading we could see that the game was called *'Wipe Out'*. My first thought was "That's not very Ultimate!" The in-game menu stated:

"DESIGNED & PROGRAMMED BY KB.RAM MCMLXXXVII"

At this point in time the general public weren't, in the main, aware of who was writing the games for Ultimate. I certainly wasn't aware of Tim and Chris Stamper, so the fact there was a name there for the very first time was a bit odd. "Who's KB. Ram?" I thought. Gary, who was sat at the keyboard, started the game up. There was a deathly silence as we saw, before our eyes, that *'Wipe Out'* was an *'Arkanoid'* clone. Ocean had paid good money for the license of the official *'Arkanoid'* conversion and, to be honest, this one looked better than our production because, among other things, the author had implemented background graphics for the levels whereas *'Arkanoid'*'s backgrounds were blank. Gary, without saying much, quickly turned the game off and disappeared upstairs to the Ocean offices and nothing was seen or heard of the game for a while. I was a bit annoyed that he hadn't left the tape lying around me for me to make a sneaky copy of. It would have been cool to have been able to show it off to my mates later. Then, a good few months later, at the end of September 1987, the latest edition of *'Your Sinclair'* was published. With it, attached to the cover, was a tape containing a copy of a game by Elite called *'Batty'*. Upon loading it was obvious to everyone that had seen *'Wipe Out'* that this was the same game but with a name change and a few graphical tweaks. So, what had happened? How did this "new Ultimate game" turn up on the cover of *'Your Sinclair'* who were now proclaiming it to be an Elite title? For years after, whenever I told this story about Gary and the new Ultimate game that was an *'Arkanoid'* rip-off, I was always told that I was either 'making it up' or had misremembered it. No, I was sure I was right and what I have just described to you actually happened. It's only recently that I found out some more information about who 'KB. Ram' was and that, the gentleman in question was undoubtedly linked to the Ultimate company. It turns out that the named author of *'Wipe Out'*, 'KB. Ram', doesn't exist. That name is an anagram of 'Mark. B.' In turn, *'Batty'* is listed on the *'World of Spectrum'* website as being by Mark Crane and that name was a pseudonym for Mark Betteridge who actually coded two of the later Ultimate titles *'Cyberun'* and, the label's very last ZX Spectrum title, *'Bubbler'*. Until someone asks Mark the right questions we have to make do with conjecture. Maybe *'Wipe Out'* was a game Mark wrote in his spare time and had planned to sell to Ultimate? Did the Stamper brothers turn it down? Or was it the powers that be, upstairs at Ocean, that put the kibosh on it once they realised that, had Ultimate released it before their official license of *'Arkanoid'* was out in the shops, then *'Wipe Out'* would be heralded as the preferable version for the games buying public? Who knows? Doing a bit of a comparison between the titles it should have been obvious to anyone who knows their ZX Spectrum stuff. The menus for *'Cyberun'*, *'Wipe Out'* and *'Batty'* are all of a very similar layout, a huge clue that the author of all three titles was the same person.

Matters were made worse when, at the end of February, adverts started to appear from Gremlin Graphics for their own *'Arkanoid'* rip-off called *'Krakout'*. The main difference with their title was that the play area had been moved round so instead of having the bat at the bottom of the screen going left and right it was on the right and moved up and down. It seemed like everyone was jumping on the 'Breakout' bandwagon. I'm sure Ocean probably looked at trying to stop Gremlin's game from being released via a meeting with their own lawyers but, evidently, they didn't succeed. *'Krakout'* didn't give them much to worry about in the end. When reviewed in issue 40 of *'Crash'* from May 1987 it was awarded a measly 46% overall. While *'Arkanoid'*, which was released under the Imagine label, was not received favourably by *'Crash'* either when they came to review it as it was given 59% overall in issue 39 from April 1987. At least our version managed to score a few more percentage points than *'Krakout'* had. We all thought *'Arkanoid'* was a cracking conversion. I think that the reviewers from *'Crash'* just had it in for 'Breakout' type games for some unknown reason. Maybe they thought they should stay in the past and not be added to or updated and were being unjustly unfair in their write-ups about them because of this. This was a view shared by a chunk of *'Crash'* readers as the same issue that contained the *'Krakout'* review featured a whole page of letters under the heading *'Ark Annoyed'* from people who had thought their review of *'Arkanoid'* had been

unduly hard on the game. A video I made about these reviews is online here:

<https://youtu.be/jqCXUrvprsw>.

Not long after the release of *'Arkanoid'* Gary stopped me as I was passing by his office and he was just walking out of it. "Mark, what did you use to make the music for *'Arkanoid'* on the Spectrum?" I replied, "*'Wham! the Music Box'*, why?" Gary's face dropped, "Oh really?" he said, "Ugh! Why didn't you pass it by me first? We've now got to pay some money to Melbourne House because of that." Apparently, if you wanted to use anything made with their software in a commercially released title you had to pay Melbourne House for the rights. I didn't know you had to get permission! I naively thought that by purchasing the software the owner had also paid for the right to do with as they pleased anything that they had produced with it. Not so. I was berated for not informing Gary before letting Mike put them in the game. It was a genuine mistake of mine. I'd only been there a few weeks and I'd cocked up already. I never found out just how much cash was paid to Melbourne House but I guess they could have named any price they wanted as the game was already out in the shops. Imagine if my mistake had resulted in the game being withdrawn? Luckily that didn't happen. If it had then my Ocean story could quite easily have ended here with a kick up the arse and my P45 in my pocket. Recently I discovered (thanks to Mark Hardisty's excellent book *'A Gremlin in the Works'*) that the authors of *'Jack the Nipper'* by Gremlin Graphics made the same mistake the year before by using music made by Melbourne House's utility. They too got a telling off from Ian Stewart, the boss of Gremlin, who revealed to them he had to pay Melbourne House £200. Learning that put my mind at rest at last, £200 would have been nothing to Ocean Software.

On Friday 6 March 1987 I finished work for the week and walked up to Piccadilly train station in Manchester to get my train home back to Northampton for the weekend. I would sometimes pop into the WHSmiths branch situated in the station and purchase a magazine to read on the trip. This was usually the latest British edition of the American *'MAD'* comic (a publication I flirted with briefly in 1983 of which that dalliance lasted a grand total of four issues). For me, the highlight of each issue was a comic strip parody of a well-known film or TV series; *'Poltergeist'* was re-named *'Paltry Guise'*, *'Knight Rider'* became *'Knut Rider'*, *'Ferris Bueller's Day Off'* was titled *'Fearless Buller's Day Off'*, *'Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan'* was *'Star Blecch II: The Wreck of Korn'* and *'Dirty Dancing'* turned into *'Dorky Dancing'*. A copy of *'MAD'* would help fill the time while on the train as there was only so much looking out the window one could do before getting bored. The journey back to Northampton was uneventful, as per usual, and it was only when I got home that I saw the news on the television about the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry capsizing moments after leaving the Belgian port of Zeebrugge, killing 193 passengers and crew. All of this happened while I was sat there oblivious to what was going on during my train journey home. It made me think, when I boarded the train all those poor people who'd just died were still alive and well. By the time I'd arrived in Northampton they had all perished. What an awful thing to have happened.

Every couple of weeks the latest version of *'Wizball'* would arrive at Ocean from the Sensible Software guys on a Commodore 64 floppy disk and I would sit there with a pencil and piece of paper and draw the new graphics from the screen in order to translate them onto the ZX Spectrum. With each floppy disc there'd be new levels, new baddies, new sections and I would get each of them on to the Spectrum screen. It didn't take me long. I did the catellite, the Ying Yang ball, the Police sprite that would fly around the screen if you were taking too long and lots of baddies that wobbled and bounced around the screen. All the graphics that were in the Commodore 64 version were now on the ZX Spectrum including many that were eventually taken out of the finished game. The only headache I was now having was trying to get the impressive Mount Rushmore graphic translated across. The Commodore 64 version looked amazing, so my ZX Spectrum equivalent had to be spot on as well. After an hour or so of tinkering about I realised it was proving to be a problem. My version was looking rather pathetic. Having spent a whole morning trying to do it by hand I had a brain wave and found a possible solution that involved a bit of cheating but would save me time. I stuck, with tape, a piece of acetate to the Commodore 64 television screen, played the latest *'Wizball'* demo and paused it when Mount Rushmore was on the screen. I then traced the graphic onto the acetate with a permanent pen then stuck the acetate onto my ZX Spectrum monitor and drew round the traced image onto the blank screen. Once I had the main shape I then filled in the detail using the traditional method. It was a crude way of getting the desired result but it worked.

After some time we were eventually handed the finished Commodore 64 version of *'Wizball'*. It was done and dusted and was looking amazing. I had never really played another game like it. With all the ZX Spectrum graphics competed it became evident there was one problem. The ZX Spectrum *'Wizball'* had fallen way behind. I don't know what the problem had been but Steve hadn't made as much progress as everyone had expected and the conversion was looking a bit ropey and a bit bare. Various bits had still not been implemented. For example - the bonus shoot 'em up stage was nowhere to be seen and, most glaringly, baddies kept disappearing when they should have remained on the screen. When he was asked why was this was happening Steve replied "Oh those? They're hyper spacing!" "Erm, no they are not!"

That's what anyone else would call a bug!" I thought. It was evident to everyone that things weren't going as well as it should have been with the conversion.

I then made my second major mistake. I left my Ocean wage slip on my desk. I had recently moved into the flat with the other Mark Jones (with a K) and the rent was £80 a week between us. Upon starting the job I had only been earning a paltry £90 a week after tax and national insurance deductions and now that I was having to pay for a flat I realised that the rent ate up almost half of my entire weeks money. So I went to see Gary in his office and pointed out that I was struggling a bit and wasn't really earning enough to live on. I had passed my initiation - the 'Mag Max' screen and most of the in-game graphics for '*Wizball*' - so Gary agreed to give me a little wage raise so that I didn't have to live on bread and lard throughout the week. Unbeknownst to me, while I was out of the room, Steve had spotted my wage slip lying there on my desk. He picked it up and had a good nose at it. He then went straight to Gary and complained that I was getting more money than him each week. His argument was that he'd already had a game published and I hadn't so why was I getting paid more than him? He argued that he should be getting more than that young, fresh, spotty faced, whipper snapper who didn't really know what he was doing anyway. For Steve, it paid off as he got his pay rise but only because, had Gary not obliged, then there was the risk that Steve could have walked out three quarters of the way through the conversion, leaving it incomplete. He'd got his own way and was afforded a couple of quid extra a week. What did I get? I got another bollocking from Gary for leaving my wage slip out. Balls up number two!

By this time, despite the couple of cock ups I'd made, I was now fairly comfortable at 6 Central Street and had settled into the routine and culture at Ocean Software. When I wasn't at work I wanted to be there. I never dreaded going in to work but when I'd finished all my graphic work for a project I had to wait for the programmer to finish his coding before I could be started on a completely new one. Sitting at my desk with no work to do was more than a little tedious. It was during these periods that I welcomed being asked to do the '*Tai-Pan*', '*Mutants*', and later on, the '*Arkanoid – Revenge of Doh*' loading screens.

The '*Tai-Pan*' screen came about when I was nearing the end of the '*Wizball*' project in April. For some reason, Sentient Software, who'd written '*Tai-Pan*' out-of-house, didn't have their own loading screen to add to the game so I set about producing one on the request of Mr. Bracey. I bounded up the three flights of stairs to the art department and requested either a photographic copy of the game artwork or a copy of the advert, as it hadn't been printed in any of the magazines yet. Upon seeing what had been produced my first impression was that it was a bit boring to look at and didn't really feel very enthused at the thought of having to transfer it over into ZX Spectrum pixels. Still, beggars can't be choosers. The first thing I drew was the intricate border. I knew that this wouldn't take long as most of it was just a repeated pattern and, once all in place, would take up quite a bit of room meaning less work would be required to get the rest of the available space filled in. I drew the two hands holding the swords, added the background in and it was as good as finished. I completed it at 11am on Tuesday 21 April 1987. I know this highly accurate yet ultimately useless fact because if one removes the colour attributes from the screen a secret message is revealed marking the exact time the screen was completed. '*Tai-Pan*' was, out of all my loading screens, the one I least enjoyed making professionally thanks to the bland artwork the game utilised.

The new May edition of '*Crash*' magazine turned up on the shelves on Thursday 30 April. It featured details of a subscription offer whereby you could take out a sub to '*Crash*' and also receive a free game from Ocean "worth £7.95". The titles on offer were '*Tai-Pan*', '*Head Over Heels*', '*Mag Max*', '*Arkanoid*', '*Army Moves*' and '*Short Circuit*'. As I read it I realised I had hand a hand in three of the titles. Just that fact pleased me immensely. Now even more people were going to read my name on their computer screens. I thought I may even, dare I say it, end up slightly famous.

With all the in-game '*Wizball*' graphics now finished my final task for the game was getting the loading screen drawn. I had been looking forward to doing this since the start of the project but left it to the end as I had been told that programmers always took longer than artists to complete a game and I would be able to work on the screen without the coder interrupting me by asking for graphics for the game itself. Earlier on I had made a half-arsed black and white start on the screen but that was before anyone had seen the amazing artwork that had been produced for the game by Bob Wakelin. I remember when word got downstairs that the art for '*Wizball*' had turned up and it was currently being photographed upstairs in the art department. Whispers went round that it was possibly one of his best to date. I stated that I really wanted to get started on the screen and, as I now didn't have anything else to do, was going out of my mind with boredom. A fresh print soon found its way downstairs to my desk where a crowd soon gathered as we gazed on the '*Wizball*' artwork for the very first time. Everyone was very impressed – this was the image that was going to go on the adverts and cassette inlays so to have one this good would only help the title once it had been released. It looked really great and everyone seemed to be of the opinion that it really was one of Bob's best yet! I immediately decided to scrap my previous attempt entirely after seeing Bob's illustration.

So while Steve appeared to be beavering away on getting the coding finished, slouched down in his chair in front of his Tatung Einstein - the machine all the ZX Spectrum programmers used to write their code on at Ocean - I beavered away at the loading screen to 'Wizball' and managed to better my previous 'Mag Max' creation. I got some help from Simon on the initial layout of the screen and with the Wizard's hands but 95% of it was my own work and it is the piece I'm most remembered for today. The only major changes that were made during its production was I had a boggle eyed blob monster on the left of the screen which I substituted for a spinning metal ball thingy right at the end as I just couldn't get it looking right. Also, the moon I had drawn was replaced by some of the green bubbles you have to pop in the game. Just before I declared it completely finished I came to the conclusion I had drawn way too many stars in the background and one of my finishing touches was to get rid of a load of them. Less is more, I thought. I enjoyed drawing the screen for 'Wizball' immensely and I think it still looks rather good today. Again, I did try really hard as this was my first full project and, as we were allowed to put our names on our work at Ocean, I wanted it to look as impressive as possible. The bulk of the screen took three or four whole days to produce and I then tinkered with it for a few days more just to make sure it was as good as it could be. After all, once it was finished I'd be back to having nothing to do.

On Thursday 28 May the June issue of 'Crash' reached newsagents (the one with the controversial 'Barbarian' cover). Page 123 contained their 'Merely Mangram' section and, for the first time, had details of two games I was involved with. 'Mag Max' got a mention as well as a screenshot featuring my redrawn main character and, even better, the very first screen, albeit a mockup, from the Spectrum 'Wizball' had been printed. It was made even more exciting for me as the write up mentioned mine and Steve's name. This marked the very first time I had my name printed in 'Crash' in a professional capacity. The article also mentioned that the game was "...to be released at the end of May." I knew there was no way on earth that was going to happen. Steve was still sat next to me trying to finish the half-written game as I was reading it! In fact, almost the whole page was about Ocean's up and coming new titles and also contained the very first mention that we had the 'Gryzor' and 'Athena' arcade licenses. 'Mutants', 'Tai-Pan', 'Platoon' and 'Renegade' were also mentioned. It was now evident to the games playing public how busy we were downstairs at 6 Central Street. From now on I was now scanning my favourite section of 'Crash', 'Merely Mangram', to look for any previews they were doing of Ocean games. Only once I'd read what had been written about Ocean would I then read the rest of the section to find out what the other software houses had in their pipelines.

Not long into the working day on Thursday June 11, the day before my 17th birthday, we were all called to Gary's office for an 'important meeting'. The somber faces and the fact that lots of the upstairs staff were now milling about only contributed to the feeling that something serious was going on. There were so many staff crammed into the room that we all had to form a circle around the perimeter in order to fit everyone in. Soon a female police officer entered the room. My immediate thought was that a member of staff had done something horrendous and she was going to pick them out of the crowd in front of everyone and arrest them. Was someone actually going to be sacked in front of everyone? She worked her way around the room, discounting staff as she went along until, that is, she got to me. It took me about an eighth of a second to realise what was going on. I was horrified and immediately went a deep shade of red once I'd realised the police officer was a strip-o-gram! She instructed me that I had to get on my knees and pull a card out of her stockings with my teeth. While down there and noticing her state of undress made it clear to me that she'd shaved a certain area that day. When I stood up it was then that I realised that her boobs were on full display. I didn't know where to look! She opened the card I had been ordered to pluck out of her nether regions and read out the poem written upon it:

*"There's a rumour going round that you Mark Jones will surrender,
To any girl that offers you a flash of her suspender.
And even computer games leave you unenthusiastic,
If competing with these stockings held by lengths of black elastic.
So they thought you'd like a real woman to bring you this surprise.
My name is Carol and I'm from 'Butterflies'*

*Happy Birthday
from everyone
downstairs."*

Carol then gave me a kiss as the whole office erupted with a round of applause. If that office door hadn't had been closed then I would have been out there like a shot. In those days I was painfully shy and had I had an inkling of what was about to happen then I would have done my utmost to disappear, probably by

locking myself in the toilets until I was certain the coast was clear. That may have been the reason it had been arranged for the day before my birthday and not on the actual day itself. Everyone knew how shy I was and had it happened on my actual birthday I may have cottoned on sooner and bolted out the door before Carol had started doing her stuff and exposing parts of her flesh. The event was recorded by Paul Owens on his handheld VHS camcorder who was perched on a desk in the corner of the room with a huge grin on his face. Fortunately, it appears that particular tape cassette hasn't survived the ensuing years and my embarrassment only still exists in my head and the memories of the people who were there at the time.

The commercial release of *'Mag Max'* was *very* late. I had remembered seeing adverts for it before I'd even thought about writing off to Ocean but I had taken a small but significant part in its development. We all knew that the game itself wasn't a state-of-the-art game but I was chuffed when the mediocre *'Crash'* review in issue 42 from July 1987 specifically mentioned:

"...the brilliant loading screen raises expectations."

That was enough for me. In its very pages, was my first piece of professional criticism and it was good. From now on I made the effort to buy two issues of every magazine that any of my work was mentioned in. I would keep one of them intact and the duplicate would have the relevant section cut out and put in to my recently acquired blue Ocean folder which was an on-going portfolio of the work I had published in the press. Any relevant previews and reviews would also be added as and when they appeared in the magazines. I'm so glad I did that now. Had I not then various pieces would have disappeared from my memory and would have probably never been seen by me again.

As Steve was still sat slouched at his desk day after day trying to get our conversion of *'Wizball'* finished every other programmer was busy with their own games so there was no one else for me to work with on a new project. I found myself at a bit of a loose end. Gary asked me if I'd I start on some graphics for an Ocean Ice Hockey game during this quiet post-*'Wizball'* period. He had asked me to draw some basic graphics of an ice hockey player and gave me some dimensions so that I could get started but no programming ever took place for the game and I was never made aware of what its title was going to be. As far as I'm aware my graphics were the only part of the game completed and the project was quietly forgotten about. It never appeared anyway and nor did I ever see any coding work done on the game. Sometimes I think I was just given any old work to do to stop me from wandering off from my desk and interrupting other staff with my silly voices and bizarre drawings though I wasn't consciously trying to annoy people. I didn't know any better but they had work to do and having me hanging about chatting wasn't conducive to anyone's level of concentration.

Other than these lulls in my workload there was nearly always something exciting going on down in those dungeons. I did now feel like a proper part of the hotbed of creativity that was happening downstairs in 6 Central Street. Most of our in-house games were now garnering really good reviews in the computer games press. The only ropey titles seemed to be some of the few that were still being developed out-of-house. Gary Bracey's plan of building a top-class in-house team to develop all the cream of the crop titles was starting to pay off now though as more and more of the top reviewed titles were coming from the in-house team. Ocean Software was on a roll and were now being spoke of as the top software house in the UK. The awards were coming in, the great reviews continued, top licenses were being bought and it seemed like, for a while, we could do very little wrong.

During another quiet period Gary Bracey popped to see me and asked me if I'd be able to produce a loading screen for the ZX Spectrum conversion of a Commodore 64 game by Denton Designs called *'Mutants'*. "Of course I would!" I replied with bounding enthusiasm. Immediately I went on a hunt for a copy of the advert, found one in a magazine and got to work. I started on the logo first which originally I'd drawn on the left-hand side of the screen. Later I decided it would look better centered so moved it over. Then I started on the main image which was this weird robot head floating in space surrounded by various blobs that I presumed were things being fired at it in an attempt to destroy it by foes unseen. Then I drew a big circle and ensured its boundaries lay at the edges of character squares as that would make dealing with the attributes easier when the time came to put the colour in. Next, I started on the detail for the robot head and mirrored it as I went along to ensure it looked okay as a whole. Once that was looking as it should I filled in the intricacies on the head's armour then mirrored each section as it was the same on both sides. As I wasn't lazy and didn't want it to be too obvious that I had just flipped one side of the head to make the other I made sure the detail in both eyes was different and did the same with the yellow smoke coming out of the head's horns. After that I added in the weird, different coloured blobs in the space surrounding the head, added some stars and lightning and it was more or less complete. Just as I was congratulating myself on another screen well done Gary came by and said, "Make sure you have 'Denton Designs' and 'Programmed by Choice' on there somewhere please." I thought I'd finished it! Luckily, I was able to move

the Ocean logo up by eight pixels to make a character wide gap at the bottom so that's where the author's credit went. Then, to keep everything looking neat and tidy, I lowered the game's title by one character (so there was a gap at the top as well) and added the 'Denton Designs' credit at the top. Later, when a pre-production tape turned up at Ocean I loaded *'Mutants'* up to have a play and check that my loading screen had actually been used. I couldn't work out what the hell I was supposed to be doing in the game and still don't know even now. I think it's one of those 'too clever for its own good' type games. Still, it has some absolutely fantastic Fred Gray 128k music that's worth a load just to hear. It's one of my most favourite 128k tunes ever but it's just a shame that you are only able to hear it just as the game has loaded. Once *'Mutants'* has started properly it doesn't get played again and you have to re-load it from scratch if you want a repeat listen.

One morning Steve Watson didn't turn up for work. "Do you know where he is?" I was asked. "No idea I'm afraid" I replied. Next day, no Steve again. Nor the day after. No one at Ocean ever saw him again. He'd walked out and left before *'Wizball'* was finished and had carried out the earlier threat that he'd made to Gary over his wages, despite, in the end, getting his wage rise. Gary was furious and I heard him ranting where he said "He'll never work in this industry again. He'll never get another job writing games. We'll make sure of it!" Was there a network where other software houses were given the names of unreliable staff who could possibly turn up at their doors looking for further employment? It does look like that *'Wizball'* was the last published ZX Spectrum title Steve Watson has to his name so maybe the threat was actually carried out and did the job. I do sometimes wonder what happened to him though. It'd be nice to know if things turned out alright for him in the end.

Despite being apparently "nearly finished" *'Wizball'* on the ZX Spectrum still had lots of features missing. It still only looked like a half-written game. I'd drawn and animated various bits that still weren't showing up in the most up-to-date version. The Ying Yang, a sixteen-frame animated graphic that the *'Wizball'* would turn into during its invincible phase - that didn't make it into the Commodore version either - wasn't there, the Cop sprite, some other baddies and the whole shoot 'em up bonus section had still not been implemented. The Wizard's Lair looked absolutely rubbish as most of it was missing. Most of the graphics for that screen hadn't been put in place, even though they'd all been drawn and a mock-up had been put together to show what it should look like. All that was displayed on the screen was a bare bones version of the room when it should have been a full screen worth of prettiness. I wasn't happy with this at all. It looked really ropey compared to how it should have looked. *'Wizball'* had to be finished though. We ended up with the code being tidied up by Ocean veteran Paul Owens so it could be released. I'm told that going through another programmer's code and adding to it is no mean feat in itself due to the different ways that programmer's write their machine code. One coder may write a routine a completely different way to another. A start-up menu was added and Peter Clarke's excellent AY music was implemented - though two of the tunes and two sound effects that are in the game's data aren't ever called up to play by the code so you never actually get to hear them. That was a real shame because one of them is brilliant. Then *'Wizball'* was mastered, duplicated and released. I was a little disappointed and more than annoyed. The whole game should have and could have been so much better.

Thirty years later, after hearing about how some people couldn't play *'Wizball'* properly as they didn't know how to stop the ball from bouncing, I made a tutorial video, using the Spectrum version, explaining how to do it and uploaded it here: <https://youtu.be/pvHQ31DuDFg>

I then spent another short period with not much really to do. All of Ocean's programmers were still busy on their own titles. I then made a tentative start on the graphics to *'Athena'* on the ZX Spectrum which I was informed would be my second proper project. The arcade board had just turned up from SNK in Japan and had been set up in 'Arcade Alley' by the electronics guy Steve Lavache. 'Arcade Alley' was a long thin room where the boards to arcade games that were in the process being converted to the home computers were connected up to monitors and joysticks by Steve. 'Arcade Alley' also held the archive of magazines that Ocean had amassed through the years in folders on a number of metal shelving units. I sat in front of the *'Athena'* arcade machine, pencil and paper in hand, and drew some drawings of some of the characters, items and the general lay out of the map on some sheets of A4 paper. I didn't have any information on any dimensions of anything yet but managed to rustle up some on-screen graphics for the main sprite and a selection of baddies featured in the arcade game. I then completed a four-frame animated walk for one of the baddies I had drawn. After this I made some map character blocks that were then placed on to the screen to make a mock-up of what a game level could possibly look like. Once I'd got that looking how I wanted I plonked some of the sprites I had on to the scenery. After just a few days' work it was already looking rather nice. As I couldn't really do much more without having some information from a programmer I made a start on a possible loading screen for the game. The only artwork we had at Ocean was a flyer that had come with the arcade board so I made a start using the illustrations from that. I got as far as drawing the games logo, a ball and chain and a fiery sword when I was then told I was to be taken off

the conversion.

Two new starters had just commenced their employment at Ocean and were to be given *'Athena'* as their debut in-house project. Andrew Deakin, Z80 programmer, and Ivan Horn, on graphics duty, arrived as a team and moved to Manchester together from down south. They'd already had two published budget games under their belts - *'Labyrinthion'* on the Budgie Budget Software label and *'Mega-Bucks'* by Firebird - that had both been released during previous year. They soon became part of the team at Ocean and, despite being a lot quieter than most of the Ocean staffers, both enjoyed a long and prolific career during their employment at the company.

I then spent a few days looking at the SNK arcade game of *'Victory Road'* as I was told this would now be my second project. The arcade board had just arrived and had been set up in *'Arcade Alley'* and the ZX Spectrum version was due to be developed in-house once a coder was free. Again, this lasted just a few days before I was, again, taken off the project. The game was eventually developed out-of-house by Paradise Software (who consisted of David Shea, Gavin Wade and Chris Edwards) and suffered from an awful, rushed looking advertisement and mediocre reviews. Due to this, and the fact the game itself wasn't that great, *'Victory Road'* sold in very few numbers making it one of the hardest Ocean/Imagine titles to get hold of today due to its rarity.

Almost everyone at Ocean had a personal stereo tape player and would put their earphones in and shut themselves off from the rest of the office when they had to really concentrate on getting some work done. I had still only been listening to The Beatles, some of their solo efforts and the odd *'Best Of'* from the likes of The Monkees, Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent who were two early, already dead, rockers from the late fifties. Simon turned up for work one morning and hurled a cassette on to my desk and said I should give it a go. "You'll love it" he said. The tape contained XTC's latest album *'Skylarking'* (rel. 27 October 1986) on one side and the just released *'Chips from the Chocolate Fireball'* by The Dukes of Stratosphear (rel. August 1987) on the other. He explained to me that they were both really the same band but under two different names and that both albums would probably appeal to me. He was right, I loved them and had the tape on constant repeat while working on my graphics. The songs sounded like *'Magical Mystery Tour'* era Beatles but had been recorded recently. Not that you'd have guessed by listening to it. I wasn't into anything 'pop' from the time, but still, for me to listen to other artists after seven years of only listening to The Beatles was a big step. I had also, while browsing through HMV's shelves in Manchester city centre to try and find something fresh to listen to, had bought a cassette of Paul McCartney's latest album *'Press to Play'* that had been released the year before on 25 August 1986. I hadn't bought it at the time as I didn't think too much of the title track, *'Press'*, that had been the lead single off the album the previous summer. I was desperate for something I hadn't heard before so thought I'd give it a go. At first it didn't really register with me. I thought it was a bit of a dud but the album soon grew on me with repeated listens. I did end up playing it a lot while working and one of my then least favourite tracks - *'Pretty Little Head'* - is probably the one tune now that, when I hear it now, transports me straight back to being in the cellars of 6 Central Street. 1987 was the twentieth anniversary of the original release of The Beatles *'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'* and EMI had just released it on CD for the very first time on 1 June, 1987. I didn't even own a CD player yet but bought a copy of the deluxe blue box set of it anyway from the HMV in Manchester city centre one lunch break. Commodore 64 artist John Palmer and his coder brother Rick were both into Pink Floyd and John lent me a tape of ex-member Roger Waters' solo album, *'Radio Kaos'* that had just been released on 15 June 1987. Again, after a few repeated listens the album started to grow on me. A few weeks later I, again, ventured to HMV in my lunch hour and bought my own copy of the album on cassette and is another that, when I hear tracks from it now, I can shut my eyes and I'm back working at Ocean again.

I had been reading about up-and-coming horror films in copies of *'Fangoria'* magazine purchased from Odyssey 7 - The Magazine & Poster Centre situated on Hanging Ditch near Manchester's Corn Exchange. Simon Butler had shown me a few copies he'd had at work and I started to buy every new issue as it came out. The shop was a regular haunt of Ocean staff out on their lunch hours and had a healthy stock of cellophane covered back issues of *'Fangoria'* situated in racks in the middle of the shop which were regularly rifled through when that month's current issue had been read front to back. Any older issues that looked particularly interesting were duly purchased.

The Clive Barker film *'Hellraiser'* was one such film that had been featured in *'Fangoria'* and was just coming up to its release in UK cinemas where it opened on Thursday 10 September 1987. The film, which featured 'brother Frank', a bizarre puzzle box called 'The Lament Configuration' that opened doors to other dimensions, four horrific Cenobites from hell and various people being pulled apart with metal hooks went on to become one of my all-time favourite horror films. I ended up seeing *'Hellraiser'* at The Point in Milton Keynes on the first Saturday after the film's release and went with my old school mate Nick Beadman. During the film Nick got up to the toilet twice in quick succession, the first time not long after it

had started then again just after halfway through. After the second time he didn't come back and completely missed the whole latter half of the film. Once he reappeared, after the film had finished, I asked him where he had been. He said he'd had a dicky tummy but I wasn't so sure. I'm sure it was more to do with the amount of gore up there on the cinema screen and Nick couldn't handle it. Nick did look a bit shifty when giving me his reason, hence me not believing him. Up to then I had never seen a gorier film other than on blurry pirated VHS cassettes in mates' living rooms that were so bad quality you couldn't really see what was going on anyway. I think the clarity of the picture quality at the cinema had got the better of Nick and he couldn't stomach it. I absolutely loved it. The female Cenobite actually scared me shitless, though the other three were all pretty horrific to look at.

Back at Ocean Simon also bought each new issue of *'Fangoria'* – for £2.60 each – but after reading his copy he would cut it up with scissors and the grossest pictures would be put up on the wall behind where him and Allan Shortt worked to make up the Ocean 'horror wall' collage, an ever changing and evolving display of some gloriously gory photos. At one point it covered most of the available wall space and was regularly used to revolt anyone being shown round Ocean at the time, even though we all knew the photos weren't real and were the results of some very talented make-up artists. Lots of the photos on the 'horror wall' originated from eighties gore flicks like *'Evil Dead'* (1981), *'Basket Case'* (1982), *'Demons'* (1985), *'Day Of The Dead'* (1985), *'Re-Animator'* (1985), *'Rawhead Rex'* (1986), *'The Fly'* (1986), *'Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2'* (1986), *'The Hidden'* (1986), *'F/X'* (1986), *'From Beyond'* (1986), *'Street Trash'* (1987), *'Predator'* (1987), *'Evil Dead 2'* (1987) *'Pumpkinhead'* (1988) and *'The Unholy'* (1988) – all worth at least one watch if you're a fan of the genre. Occasionally I would scour the wall for any new gross additions then ask Simon or Allan which film it was from. I'd then keep a look out for a copy, either on sell-through VHS in the shops or, sometimes, Allan would be able to obtain hard-to-get pirated films and we'd watch it in awful quality on a portable television. One film he managed to get before it was out at the cinema was a pirate VHS of *'A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors'*. Allan allowed me to borrow it over a weekend while I was back in Northampton where I watched it at least three times with various friends. It was so bad quality that any quiet periods in the film were accompanied by what sounded like machinery whirring away as the video recorder used to copy it had overcompensated on the sound recording as it automatically pumped up the volume during the silence. Some films proved elusive until years later. *'Rawhead Rex'* and *'Pumpkinhead'* were two such films. It was only with the advent of DVDs ten or so years later that I could finally watch a moving version of the photos that I had seen on the horror wall from the decade before.

Also purchased from Odyssey 7 was *'Viz Comic'* which was becoming really popular and wasn't seen, by me anyway, for sale anywhere else. You certainly couldn't buy it in WHSmiths at this point, it was way too rude for their shelves. Back then there had been nothing else like *'Viz'* before, it was still a little bit underground at this stage and was published on rather poor-quality paper. It was so rude, risqué and unpolitically correct but had many Ocean staffers in stitches and quite a few of us bought each new issue as it was published. A copy of *'Viz'* could regularly be found hidden on Gary's desk, under reams of letters and film scripts of potential licenses. On my weekend trips back to Northampton none of my mates had ever heard of *'Viz'* and it certainly wasn't available to buy anywhere in the town. I had also just furnished myself with a complete set *'Fabulous Furry Freak Brother'* & *'Fat Freddy's Cat'* comics by Gilbert Shelton and discovered the humour of *'Calvin and Hobbes'* by Bill Watterson. Another collection I ended up buying was compiled stories of *'2000 AD's 'Sláine'* written by Pat Mills and illustrated by various artists. I looked out for each new edition and bought them as and when they came out.

During 1986 and up to around the middle of 1987 the original machines that Ocean's coders used to write Z80 on for the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC were Tatung Einstein's. Mike Webb, one of Ocean's earlier coders, had written the original editor/assembler for the machine. The code would be typed in on the Tatung then downloaded to the target machine for running and testing. Doing it this way meant that the coders had a more stable media to save their work on, the Tautung's three-inch floppy disc, rather than the, as was the case with ZX Spectrum code, temperamental Sinclair Microdrives. Then in mid-1987 Ocean shifted to developing games on the recently released Atari ST. The ST editor/assembler for the Z80 was written by Paul Owens and the 6502/68000 assembler, for coding Commodore 64 games, was by Dave Collier. 6502 was used by the Commodore 64 and NES processors. 68000 was the Atari ST/Commodore Amiga and Sega Megadrive processors. Paul Hughes and Allan Shortt wrote the 68000 debugger which was also part of the in-house utility. Another advantage of using the Tatung/ST development kit was that had coders developed on the target machine they were writing for they had to give up an amount of memory for the editor/assembler program itself. With the editor/assembler on a separate machine coders could assemble and download using all the target machine's memory in one go.

Paul Hughes remembers sitting in a meeting with Ocean boss David Ward, Dave Collier and John Brandwood early on in 1987 trying to convince him to buy everyone Atari ST's for an 'all in one' assembler.

The development system was written originally on an assembler called K-Seka on the Atari ST and the first thing David Collier got working on the new Ocean set up was the 68000 assembler so that it could assemble independently. From then on, the Ocean development kit was written with itself. The system could also assemble Z8 - which was the Nintendo Game Boy's CPU and the 65C816 which was the SNESs CPU and also 8086 for the later PC's and the ill-fated Konix multisystem machine. When *'Wizball'* was being coded a Tatung was used to write it. By the time my next project started Atari ST's were on every programmer's desk and the Tatung's were sat under desks gathering dust.

The next project I was given was to convert the graphics from the Konami arcade game *'Gryzor'*, which had only just come out in the arcades, to the ZX Spectrum. It appears that the game was known as *'Contra'* everywhere else in the world, but we never heard that name at all back then. The arcade board that turned up for us to work from was titled *'Gryzor'* so that was the name we went by. Paul Owens, who had just finished off *'Wizball'*, was the programmer assigned to code the game so I was teamed up with him for the project. The arcade board was connected up in *'Arcade Alley'*, set to *'Free Play'* and I'd sit down in front of it and see how far I could get. I'd do a quick sketch of the various bits and pieces I saw on the screen on to paper then draw as near as the equivalent I could on my ZX Spectrum's screen. I was still crap at playing games though so Mark K. Jones, who was better at *'Gryzor'* than me, videoed the whole game through to the end and that video was referred to in order to see the later levels. I never got anywhere near those later levels when I had a go so there was no chance of me actually playing those. The VHS would have to do. Some modifications were going to have to be made to the game during the development as there was no way we'd be able to fit it all in to the humble ZX Spectrum. Quite a few bits had to be left out in order to get it to run on the 8-bit machine. We just didn't have time, the memory or the processing power to implement everything the arcade version had. Luckily, the process of converting *'Gryzor'* was a relatively painless one. We had to decide what were the essential elements of the game were so that people would recognise it as being *'Gryzor'* then get those elements up and running. Once that was all in, we could, hopefully, spend a little time to add a little bit here and there until it was time for Gary to say, "Hand it over then!"

While I was beaver away on my game *'Target: Renegade'* was also being coded in the cellars at Ocean. This wasn't an arcade conversion, as *'Renegade'* had been, but an original game that had been designed in-house after getting permission from Taito to use the *'Renegade'* name. I remember a couple of design meetings taking place in Gary's office and some neat design documents were drawn up showing the various baddies featured in the game drawn by artist Martin McDonald. John Palmer and Martin were assigned to produce the graphics for the Commodore 64 version while David Collier was the coder. John and David were sat in next room along to mine. On the other side of me was Mike Lamb and Dawn Drake who were working side by side on the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC versions. While I wasn't involved in the making of the game I ended up having a cameo featured in two versions of it – most probably because I spent more time than I should have wandering around and annoying people while they tried to work. On level four of the 64 version John put up a poster on the wall showing his rendition of one of Simon's cartoons of me and had written 'not wanted' underneath it! Ha! Later Dawn also added a similar poster to the ZX Spectrum version but had changed the wording to 'Animal!' This may have been in reference to episodes of flatulence I sometimes displayed (much to Dawn's disgust!) You can see this on screen two of level two. I'm not sure which one of the two is the most unflattering! It appears, perhaps thankfully, that I didn't make an appearance in the Amstrad CPC version.

One thing that started to annoy me slightly during the production of *'Gryzor'* was that, after being given the go-ahead and the size and the number of frames I was allowed by Paul I would produce an animated sprite or an explosion. The graphic would then just end up never being put into the finished game or had the number of frames used cut back. I produced an eight-frame explosion and it was cut down to four so didn't look as good as I had intended. The main sprite originally had a four-frame running animation and it ended up being chopped in two so we had a two-frame top half and four frames for the legs running because there wasn't enough memory to have the original in. It just didn't look as good. I drew an animated sprite of a little baddy man that wasn't used at all. There's a dead Lance sprite and a graphic for him when he jumped down a level. They were both left out. One screen I still have contains all the pick-ups and extra gun graphics that I'd translated onto the Spectrum and none of them made it in either. I'd spend all afternoon on a sprite only to be told, weeks later, there wasn't enough room for it and I'd get a little peeved. If I'd been a few years older, more mature and experienced then I guess it might not have bothered me as much as it did. Most of my *'Gryzor'* development work has survived on Microdrives so I can, at least, go back and see all those various bits that were, inevitably, not used.

The other downer for me on this project was that *'Crash'* had asked for a demo for their first cover tape which was going to be given away with the October issue, number 45. I'd completed the graphics for the first level and had enough animations for *'Crash'* to have a playable demo and Paul Owens had said

this was okay and that he would have something to give them in time for their looming deadline. For some reason, after a few weeks, it became apparent that the playable demo wouldn't be ready. 'Crash' had already announced in issue 44 that a demo of 'Gryzor' would be included on their cover tape and it wasn't going to be. We'd let them down.

Anyway, I eventually forgot about missing out on having a demo of our new game on the 'Crash' tape and, not long after, Bob Wakelin's art for the game turned up at Ocean. As soon as I heard, as I had with 'Wizball', I rushed upstairs to see it and got hold of a photographic print of the finished piece to use as reference for the loading screen that I needed to draw. I started by drawing the two muscly men then, as soon as I was happy that they looked okay, filled in the background and border graphics. It took about five days in all to complete and I really enjoyed drawing it. Paul then spent a few more weeks finishing off the game's code and development of 'Gryzor' came to a close after three or four months and the game was released to the shops.

Later, I came to realise that I have what appears to be the only copy of the artwork for 'Gryzor' with no text or overlays on it. The photographic print I was given by the art department that day preserved the unfettered artwork. All the images used on the tape inlays, adverts and posters have text overlaid on top of the art. The artwork that Bob handed in to Ocean for 'Gryzor' has a blank background by request of the art director so, if you look at his original, there's a huge expanse of white space behind Bob's creation. This was then overlaid on to part of the artwork that was used for the arcade game. A photo was then taken of this composite image and used as the art for the Ocean game. So, the background was produced by a different artist to Bob who painted the image of the two beefy men holding guns and the alien environment around the edges. It then turns out that no other version of this clean image was ever kept other than that print I grabbed to make the loading screen from. Sadly, my Microdrive that contained my working versions of the 'Gryzor' loading screen has been lost over the years. It would have been nice now to be able to look at the earlier versions of it and see exactly in which order the various parts were drawn. Luckily, some of my other loading screen work did survive so it is possible to now see earlier 'work-in-progress' versions of those screens as they were being drawn.

Again, I wasn't too happy with how well 'Gryzor' turned out. In the finished game the scrolling sections look a bit bland. I was only allowed two four x four-character squares on a scrolling line at any time. So if the game wanted to introduce a new background graphic I would have to have had a gap of spaces so that the background graphic that was no longer needed could scroll off the screen before the code introduced the new one. The whole play area looked a bit repetitive because of this. I also wasn't very happy with the amount of graphic flicker that was on display. Some of the graphics flickered quite a lot when the game was being played. This was 1987! There had been many scrolling games by that time that didn't flicker. Ocean's 'Cobra', from the previous year, being one of them. I didn't like flicker and I didn't think there was any real excuse for it in 1987.

By now I had got to know everyone who worked in the programming department at Ocean. I got on with everyone to varying degrees. There was certainly no one there who was horrible and wholly unlikeable. I ended up getting on best with Simon Butler and Kane Valentine, one of the games testers. Kane was near enough the same age as me and was always up for going out should the mood take us. Simon relied on car lifts from others or the train in order to get to and from work, as he lived over on the other side of Liverpool. So he was bound by others as to whether he could join us for any after work sojourns as he either had to make sure he had a lift home or left to go home in time for the last train. Kane lived with his Mum and her partner in the outskirts of Manchester so it wasn't that difficult for him to stay out after work and still be able to get back home at the end of the night. Many nights were spent sat in, firstly, Pizza Hut or the like, then we'd end up in all manner of pubs and bars. I much preferred going out after work than going home as nothing went on in the flat once I'd walked in and locked the door behind me. I had the television and my ZX Spectrum and that was it. We didn't even have a phone or a video player. No one knocked on the door to visit so any sort of social activity was gladly accepted by myself. At the end of the night we'd always end up at another member of Ocean staff's house or at Kane's Mum's. She was a lovely lady, always smiling lots and in a jolly mood and she always made me feel welcome at their house. Kane and I, who was, by the end of the night, usually the worse for wear, would sleep off the effects of the alcohol in his front room on the two sofas. Kane, for some reason, didn't have the luxury of his own bedroom for some reason so always slept in the living room. Once, after a night out, we ended up at Commodore 64 coder John Meegan's house. He had recently just moved in and had literally no furniture whatsoever. The three of us tried sleeping on the hard-wooden floorboards of the back room, fighting over the one flimsy blanket that John had to hand. I didn't get much sleep that night and felt like death the next morning. I also recall another night where three or four of us were trying to get to sleep in Lorraine's porch area in her house between the front door and hallway after another night out drinking. I had never been so uncomfortable while trying to gain some shut eye. I didn't get much sleep that night either, if any.

Kane, as well as testing games, was responsible for keeping the programming department in liquid refreshments and, once in the morning and again in the afternoon, would call round to every room and ask "D'ya want a brew?" He would ask round one side of the cellars, make their brews, then come round to the other side and repeat the process. Once everyone's orders had been taken he would then make his way to the tiny kitchen and make everyone's drinks of either tea or coffee using the complimentary dark blue Ocean mugs that were all emblazoned with the company logo. He'd then dish them all out, spilling what looked like at least half a cup of liquid on to the tray during the journey, which would be swimming in tea and coffee by the time he'd got to your desk with your drink. A quick wipe of the bottom of the mug would be in order to eradicate the inevitable sticky rings of spilt beverages that would then adorn the work surface if you failed to carry out the preventative wipe. Kane also went to the shop for everyone, again, usually twice a day. You could hear him asking "D'ya want out from shop?" in the distance which would give you a few minutes to work out, one, if you did actually want anything from the shop and, two, what was it going to be? It was usually for things like a *Twix*, a *Mars Bar*, some *Opal Fruits*, a can of *Pepsi* or *Coke* or a packet of *Walker's* crisps. Lots of Ocean staff, including me, bizarrely went through a period of buying *Kinder Eggs*, an egg-shaped hollow chocolate that didn't taste particularly nice at the time but also contained a toy that you had to assemble yourself. *Kinder Eggs* had been invented by William Salice and manufactured by Italian company Ferrero. When they arrived in UK shops a disturbing advert was broadcast on the television featuring a grotesque Humpty Dumpty character that spoke in a bizarre language - "Chock-A-Doo-Bee!" he proclaimed. If this was aimed at kids then the only certain thing to come from it was surely a nightmare? I was not a particular fan of the chocolate and would throw the edible part away and keep the toy. Many monitors at Ocean ending being covered with these Kinder toys that arrived encased in a plastic egg inside the hollow chocolate. They were usually Disney characters like Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, Minnie, Pluto and Goofy or strange looking people with stick on plastic hair and hats, tiny plastic film cameras that had a real picture you could see if you looked in the minute view finder, little hippos, lorries, cars, boats, motorbikes, helicopters, planes, trains and all sorts of other oddments. It was not unusual for Kane to come back with a whole tray or two of the things that he had just picked up off the shelf at the newsagents as he had received orders for so many of them from his workmates. If someone received a toy they already had sitting on their monitor then they could try and swap it with someone else in another room who didn't have it already. It was amazingly childish of us but quite a few of us ended up with an immense collection of *Kinder Egg* toys. I kept mine for a few years but eventually binned them all in the mid' 1990s.

Wednesday 19 August 1987 was a dark day in the UK. Michael Robert-Ryan, an unemployed part-time antique art dealer and handyman, fatally shot sixteen people in the town of Hungerford, Berkshire, before turning his pistol on himself and committing suicide. Ryan also shot and killed his own mother and a dog. The shootings, committed using a handgun and two semi-automatic rifles, occurred at several locations, including one of the schools he attended when he was a child. Fifteen other people were also shot but survived. The massacre was on the front page of every newspaper the next day and for days after. Ocean then found themselves in a bit of a pickle as they were currently advertising the forthcoming '*Gryzor*' and '*Combat School*' games with an advert showing two rifles along with the strap line:

"SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE
BOTH WORLDS APART."

One of the rifles on the advert, the Colt XM-177E1 Commando, was considered a little too close for comfort to one of the weapons used in the actual massacre so the advert was hastily re-designed and the rifle removed to avoid accusations of poor taste. The strap line on the new advert was hastily changed to:

"SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE
WORLDS APART,
IN STORE NOW."

with the last line replacing where the offending rifle had been.

The magazine reviews for '*Wizball*' were now starting to appear and I was unexpectedly and pleasantly surprised by what I was reading. This game that, in my eyes, was released unfinished had gained itself a coveted *Crash Smash* in issue 45 from October 1987 with a score of 88% for the graphics and an overall mark of 92%. I was so pleased. Two issues of that edition of '*Crash*' were bought. One was butchered for inclusion in my folder/portfolio, the other copy was kept whole and went into my collection. Two more great reviews for '*Wizball*' followed. A review in issue 67 of '*Sinclair User*' from October 1987 awarded the game a *Classic* status and a score of 10 out of 10. I was very annoyed though that the whole review had been illustrated using earlier mockups of what the game should have looked like had it been

completed properly. So if a member of the public had bought the game and loaded it up it on the strength of what they'd seen in that magazine they would have only been disappointed as it didn't look like anything like the screenshots printed. Issue 23 of *'Your Sinclair'* from November 1987 rounded off the reviews of the three magazines that I deemed the important ones with another excellent review of *'Wizball'* and a score of 9/10 for graphics and an overall score of 8/10, though no *Megagame* status was awarded. I couldn't really have hoped for more. I just regretted the fact that had everything gone in the game that should have then the reviews would have been even better. I'd still like to see something along the lines of *'Wizball Redux'* on the ZX Spectrum - a new version complete with everything the superior Commodore 64 version contained. All the Commodore 64 graphics were converted over to the ZX Spectrum back in 1987 and they all still exist. So it's something that would be possible to do in the future if someone who knows Z80 machine code had the time and the inclination to do so.

This issue of *'Crash'* also had their *'Crash Sampler Tape'* attached to the cover. The tape they'd asked for a demo of *'Gryzor'* for. Instead they'd included a demo of Andrew Deakin and Ivan Horn's *'Athena'*, which they had both started work on a few weeks before. Andy and Ivan had come to the rescue and finished a playable demo of one level in time for the tape to be duplicated. Inside the magazine it stated, "We were hoping to have *'Gryzor'* as well but development of the program continues even now". I was very disappointed not to have had a demo of my latest game on the *'Crash'* tape but it was out of my hands. I'd completed the graphics needed so I couldn't have done any more.

On Thursday 15 October 1987 the first finished copies of the Spectrum *'Wizball'* turned up at Ocean. As soon as word reached me that they had arrived I made my way upstairs and bagged two copies for my personal collection from the metal filing cabinet that was used to house the actual copies of games that Ocean had in stock. This was a big day for me. My first published game for which I'd contributed *all* the graphics. The bulk of their games were housed in a warehouse that I never visited nor ever knew the location of but a small selection of current titles were also kept in the offices at 6 Central Street. I had my first real game actually in my hands as a physical object, albeit much later than I'd anticipated. Remember that *'Crash'* had mentioned that *'Wizball'* was "...to be released at the end of May"? The actual release occurred a whole four and a half months later. It was so late it just wasn't funny.

Around the tail end of the year I had a hand in helping to design the game to go with the film license of *'Platoon'*. The Oliver Stone directed film had enjoyed a hugely successful run in cinemas earlier in the year, hitting the UK on 24 April 1987 after being released in the USA in time for Christmas the year before. The film had cost \$6 million dollars to make and ended up taking \$138.5 million at the box office. Ocean wanted to capitalise on that success and get their home computer version of *'Platoon'* out in time for the home video release. At the time I was now staying at principal *'Platoon'* designer Simon Butler's house somewhere on the other side of Liverpool in a district called Seaforth. I hadn't settled while living in the flat I shared with Mark K. Jones so I ended up moving out towards the end of the year. My decision to leave had nothing to do with Mark, I just didn't like living in a block of flats having grown up in a terraced house. That flat never felt quite the same as living in a proper house. For a start we didn't have a garden and having to walk up a depressing set of dingy stairs to get to the front door didn't help matters. I do remember once that it was Mark "Senior"'s turn to take the weekly bins out. He was having trouble remembering to do it, I didn't think it was fair that I was doing it all the time. He was going back home for a week's annual leave. As a hint I put the bins by the front door so that Mark would pass them on his way out and put them with the rest of the block of flats rubbish. I came home from work and the bins weren't where I'd left them so I presumed they were where they should be. Come the middle of the following week I was smelling something yucky in the flat. I thought something had died in there. After a short investigation I found the Mark had moved the bin bags from the front door and put them in his wardrobe in his bedroom! I was horrified. It would have taken more effort to bring them back in and put them there rather than put them outside where I thought they were! Anyway, newly appointed Commodore 64 graphics guy John Palmer took my place in the flat at Sunnybank Avenue and I moved in, albeit temporarily, with Simon.

One night after work we both sat down with some sheets of A4 paper in Simon's living room and started throwing some ideas around and the very first initial game ideas for *'Platoon'* are written in my scrawly handwriting. Simon was coming up with most of the ideas and I was writing them down for him. He had done this games designing lark a few times before so knew more about what was needed than I did. To my credit though I did manage to come up with the idea for the sequence where an enemy soldier would surprise the player by appearing up out of the flooded tunnel and attack you with a large knife. Simon went on to finalise the design at Ocean and then set about producing some great looking story boards that, in the end, were used as a prize in a competition in issue 50 of *Crash* magazine from March 1988. The first full specification for *'Platoon'* was written out by Simon himself:

Part 1

PLATOON – proposed game specification.

Platoon follow 'point'. i.e. Leader of Platoon (front man).

He uses machete to clear undergrowth in front & machine gun for attacking enemies.

E.g: * <---- Point
 *)
 *) Platoon
 *)

Platoon just follow leader. If leader killed then next man in line takes 'point'.

Objectives:- to reach a set check point and dig in awaiting arms & reinforcements & medics for wounded.

'Point' can take '?' hits before killed.

A map of area can be referenced to see progress. 'M' key.

Some routes thru' jungle may be booby trapped, an alternative route must be found.

Part 2

Once check-point reached & secured night descends.

Screen darkens.

Charlie attacks. Platoon have only limited supply of flares and/or tracer bullets.

Enemy's position may be discerned from starting point of their tracers or by using flares. Best use must be thought out accordingly. A flare at the wrong time may only reveal one enemy soldier, or if used correctly, a larger proportion of attacking forces.

Once daylight comes, a radio signal may be received from HQ, with it will come next objective.

Choppers will arrive at every other checkpoint with aforementioned supplies etc.

Objective: to get deep into enemy territory & radio position for air-strike. To protect Platoon & achieve 1st directive without loss of too many men. To serve out 1 year & "get back to the real world."

Platoon may carry medical supplies.

Any player/man on 'point' may be pulled out of a fire-fight & sent to rear for attention. Said person is replaced (by use of 'C' key: change) by next in line.

Too many replacements uses up limited supply of medication and any further wounded will die accordingly.

Loss of too many men will result in game's conclusion, albeit unsuccessfully as will loss of total Platoon, which goes without saying.

Weapons may be changed but each weapon will have its limitations, number of rounds, shells, overheating etc.

If radio man lost then contact with base impossible and only by capturing enemy radio can contact be regained.

Hits on person, stamina & morale will be shown in 'bar' form or possibly in icon form."

I was so impressed by Simon's finished story boards for the game that I made a set a black and white photocopies from the originals to keep for myself. I was aware that they were going to be given away as a prize in a forthcoming competition in 'Crash' and didn't want them to disappear into obscurity once the lucky winner had taken delivery of them all. Fortunately, colour copies were also made of some of the boards upstairs at Ocean for insertion into the press pack that was assembled to send out to magazines, distributors and shops to promote 'Platoon'. I managed to grab a selection of those at the time so, out of the eight story boards that Simon produced, there's currently only two where no colour copy is available for us to look at now.

Down in London the '10th Personal Computer World Show' at the Olympia Exhibition Hall was underway from Wednesday 23 to Sunday 27 September 1987. Apparently, over 75,000 people visited the show that year, which was 9,000 more than the year before. I had got myself a pass that would enable me to visit on one of the two trade days and so had Conrad Bedford, Mark Edwards and Jason Gould via NHCC. So, all four of us went down there together on the train. This was the first computer trade show I'd ever been to. I never had the money to go when I was younger and, besides, didn't have any idea how to travel on a train without Mum or Dad to accompany me back then. Various companies had stands at the show which included U.S.Gold, Telecomsoft (who owned Rainbird and Firebird), Activision, CRL,

Microprose, Ariolasoft, Sinclair, Amstrad, Atari, Argus Press, Quicksilva, Mirrorsoft, Martech, Virgin Games, Piranha, Novagen and Domark. My memory of it is hazy but a few photos that we took at the event still exist and show what part of the huge Ocean Software stand looked like. It was easily the most impressive stand at the show. In one photo I am standing behind the sales desk along with Ocean staffers Jane Smithies and Clare Barnwell who were there to deal with any sales and questions from customers. Behind them are racks full of the latest Ocean titles and, on the desk, free promotional paper hats and 'I LOVE OCEAN' banners. Ocean t-shirts, including some decorated with a black and white version of the 'Renegade' art, adorn the wall behind them attached to cartoon heads. Ocean were promoting many new titles at the show, some not released yet, which included 'Wizball', 'Tai-Pan', 'Mad Balls', 'Where Time Stood Still', 'Rastan', 'Basket Master', 'Victory Road', 'Athena', 'Platoon', 'Combat School', 'Phantys', 'Army Moves' and 'Freddy Hardest', three games by Spanish developers Dinamic - the first of which they wouldn't end up releasing and also spelt wrong as 'Phantys' in their own brochure, 'Eco', Ocean's first 16-bit title, 'Psycho Soldier' and 'Flash Point' - a game by Denton Designs that, despite having art commissioned and produced for it by Bob Wakelin, was never released commercially and only saw the light of day by being released on a free magazine tape given away with 'Your Sinclair' three full years later on front of the November 1989 edition. The tape label for it exclaimed "Complete Full Price Game. Never Before Released". Full price? It had never been released, at full price or budget! All of these titles featured in the glossy full colour sixteen page A4 brochure made especially for the show. Various arcade machines of forthcoming conversions were set up on free play on Ocean's stand and video screens were displaying trailers to some of the film licenses Ocean had just acquired but that were so new not enough work had been yet completed of the games themselves. For these no actual demos were up and running, they just didn't exist at this point. It was a good and long day out, but our legs had as good as given up the ghost by the time we got back to the train station for the journey back home.

At work one day I was making my way from my office round to the other side and I bumped into someone I recognised from the television. Brian Trueman was in the Ocean dungeons and was being shown round by Gary. Brian had presented children's TV show 'Screen Test' between 1979 and 1983 after taking over from Michael Rod and was also the writer of, in all, 79 episodes of Cosgrove Hall's 'Danger Mouse' (which, by 1983, had attracted 21 million viewers) and provided some of the voices for the show. Though I didn't know it at the time he had also been involved in many of the dinner time children's shows I'd watched and loved as a kid including 'Cockleshell Bay', 'Jamie and the Magic Torch' and 'Chorlton and the Wheelies'. What was he doing at Ocean I hear you ask? It was only many years later that I found out when Paul Hughes informed me that Brian had written a script for a TV programme and wanted a fake game to be produced so that one of the kids in it could be seen playing it. Ocean produced the fake game with Paul on coding duties, John Palmer on graphics and Jon Dunn on musical duties. Looking at the people involved I'd say it's a safe guess to presume this was made for the Commodore 64. Any more details seem to be lost to time, though Paul has hinted he may have a disc with said program on it in his attic! After some searching of the internet it turns out an episode of ITV children's series 'Dramarama' had been written by Brian Trueman. It was called 'Making Waves' and was broadcast on 4 July 1988. This must surely be it! If so, was the demo actually used in it? Until someone comes up with a copy of the show, as it's not on any of the current 'Dramarama' DVD compilations or on YouTube, we can't be certain.

I lived at Simon's for just a few months. He hadn't learnt to drive a car so obviously didn't have access to one. So for us to get to and from work on time we had to wake up at a ridiculous o'clock in the morning, around 5:30am, so that Martin McDonald, an Amstrad CPC artist who passed by Simon's house on his way to work, could collect us at 6:30am. During one such journey into Manchester I became quite ill and had to stick my head out the window while we were in a slow moving traffic jam and vomit down the side of Martin's car, much to the amusement of passing drivers who were pointing at me and laughing. We'd get into Manchester city centre around 7:30am and then have to sit around in a cafe on St. Peter's Square for an hour until the doors to Ocean were unlocked and we could get into work. The reason we had to leave so early was that if we arrived in Manchester after 7:30am it was impossible to park anywhere as all the spaces had been taken up by other car owners also working in Manchester city centre. Back then there was a huge area near the back of the Hacienda that had just been bulldozed and was being used as a makeshift car park for people who commuted into Manchester by road. I also remember that, for the duration of my stay at Simon's, I had no curtains of any sort in the front bedroom I slept in, making getting a good night's sleep rather impossible. Also, right outside the window was a streetlight so the room I was sleeping in was always bathed in light. It wasn't long before I was feeling knackered before I'd even got to work every morning. The arrangement didn't last long and, after asking about at Ocean, I was made aware that ZX Spectrum artist Bill Harbison, who was living in a flat in Alan Road in the Withington area of Manchester, slept in his living room and didn't use the bedroom for anything. He had a spare room that I could make use of. A quick word was had and Bill offered me the room on the spot which I duly accepted

and looked forward to being able to get a reasonable amount of sleep at last. That expectation was shattered when, a few weeks after moving in, it became apparent that someone living in the flat next to us would regularly play dance music at full volume starting around 3am most mornings. It was dreadful. Their hi-fi may as well have been in the same room as me and no amount of banging on the walls made any difference. I just couldn't fathom why anyone would do this and have no consideration for anyone else living in the same block of flats! Whoever it was probably couldn't even hear me shouting for them to turn it down it was so loud. When I did manage to get to sleep and was, eventually, woken by my radio alarm clock at 8:15 am the song that always seemed to be playing on the radio was Neneh Cherry's *'Buffalo Stance'* (rel. 28 November 1988). If I hear that song now, I'm immediately reminded of that bedroom, the bare floorboards and sleepless nights on an old, manky mattress.

Ex-Beatle George Harrison released a cover version of James Ray's 1962 song *'I've Got My Mind Set on You'* on 12 October 1987 and it did very well sales-wise. The song was being played lots on the radio and got to number one in the US Billboard and Cashbox singles charts and number two here in the UK. I quite liked it and bought a twelve-inch picture disc single of it from HMV in Manchester. The following album - titled *'Cloud Nine'* and released on 2 November 1987 - also did very well, reaching number eight in the US Billboard chart and number ten in the UK. It was nice to have an ex-Beatle proving to be popular again, so I bought the album, again on cassette from the same shop, to listen to while I was at work. It's another long player that, if I play nowadays, takes me back down to those hallowed cellars at Central Street.

It was around this time that I bought myself a *'Multiface'* interface for my Spectrum which was produced by a company called Romantic Robot. I'd seen Adrian's in action back in Northampton the year before and fancied getting one for myself. He had an earlier version of the device made for the 48k ZX Spectrum. By this time there was a newer 128k model out and that's the one I sent off for which cost me £44.95 from my Ocean wage. The older 48k model retailed at £39.95 but the newer 128k version had more features so cost a little more. After a week or so it arrived and I used it quite extensively at Ocean, mainly to assist me in making a collection of classic games on Microdrive cartridges that I could have a quick go on either when I was bored in my lunch hour or was seeking inspiration. I also used it to save the odd program that had been sent into Ocean for evaluation and I fancied keeping a copy of. Gary would never leave tapes lying about but if the program was already loaded into my ZX Spectrum I could press the red button on the interface and save myself a copy once he'd gone back to his office and he was none the wiser. Each Microdrive cartridge was capable of storing 85kb worth a data so I was able to get two 48k games at least on each one. For some, and when space allowed, I even added in each relevant loading screen so that I could have a quick look at it (for all of 10 seconds or so) as the game loaded in. Loading screens were a nice part of the game, they helped set the scene, so I didn't want to leave them out if I could help it. On occasion I would manage to fit three titles on a drive, especially if some of them were 16k games. The most I ever managed was four. I wrote a little basic loader for each cartridge and a 'RUN' command would load it in. A menu would pop up with the name of the games and a corresponding number next to each one. A press of a key would then load in the chosen game. Over my time at Ocean I built up quite a collection of old classic titles from my ZX Spectrum gaming history past and present. In no particular order, the fifty-three cartridges contained the following games:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 01. <i>'TLL'/'Cyclone'</i> | 18. <i>'Jet Set Willy'/'Astronut'</i> |
| 02. <i>'Mr Wimpy'/'Cobra'</i> | 19. <i>'Dynamite Dan'/'Ad Astra'</i> |
| 03. <i>'Dark Star'/'Transversion'/'Spectacle'</i> | 20. <i>'Wizard's Lair'/'Cookie'/'3D Deathchase'</i> |
| 04. <i>'HERO'/'Ms. Pacman'</i> | 21. <i>'Splat!/'Trashman'/'Tranz Am'</i> |
| 05. <i>'Moon Alert'/'Sam Spade'/'Freez' Bees'</i> | 22. <i>'Turmoil'/'Cauldron II'</i> |
| 06. <i>'Boulderdash'/'Rockford's Riot'/'Tribble Trubble'/'Jungle Trouble'/'Pool'</i> | 23. <i>'Kokotoni Wilf'/'Blade Alley'</i> |
| 07. <i>'Runes of Zendos'/'Rasputin'</i> | 24. <i>'Three Weeks in Paradise'/'Sir Fred'</i> |
| 08. <i>'Legend of Avalon'/'Dragontorc'</i> | 25. <i>'Penetrator'/'Scuba Dive'</i> |
| 09. <i>'Fairlight'/'Marsport'</i> | 26. <i>'The Birds and the Bees'/'Antics'</i> |
| 10. <i>'Sabre Wulf'/'Underwulde'</i> | 27. <i>'Stop the Express'/'Elite'/'Hungry Horace'/'Arcadia'</i> |
| 11. <i>'Tir Na Nog'/'Dun Darach'</i> | 28. <i>'Ghostbusters'/'Gift from the Gods'</i> |
| 12. <i>'Knight Lore'/'Alien 8'</i> | 29. <i>'Hyper Sports'/'Mikie'</i> |
| 13. <i>'Manic Miner'/'Starstrike II'</i> | 30. <i>'Lunar Jetman'/'Nebulus'</i> |
| 14. <i>'Atic Atac'/'Firelord'</i> | 31. <i>'Escape from Krakatoa'/'Starquake'</i> |
| 15. <i>'Sentinel'/'Hydrofool'</i> | 32. <i>'The Hobbit'/'The Oracle's Cave'</i> |
| 16. <i>'Strontium Dog'/'Fantastic Voyage'</i> | 33. <i>'Valhalla'/'The Lord of the Rings'</i> |
| 17. <i>'Hellfire'/'Contact: Sam Cruise'</i> | 34. <i>'Pi-Eyed'/'Pi-Mania'</i> |

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| 35. 'Highway Encounter'/'Scooby Doo' | 45. 'Skool Daze'/'Back to Skool' |
| 36. 'Wriggler'/'Firefly' | 46. 'Cauldron'/'Soldier of Fortune' |
| 37. 'Bugaboo'/'I, of the Mask'/'Harrier Attack'/'Thrusta' | 47. 'Bobby Bearing'/'Blue Max' |
| 38. 'Psytron'/'The Lords of Midnight' | 48. 'Lode Runner'/'The Snowman'/'Aquaplane' |
| 39. 'Doomdark's Revenge'/'Starion' | 49. 'Automania'/'Pyjamarama' |
| 40. 'Wheelie'/'Turbo Esprit' | 50. 'UGH!'/'Rex' |
| 41. 'Everyone's a Wally'/'Herbert's Dummy Run' | 51. '3D Ant Attack'/'Zombie Zombie' |
| 42. 'Moon Cresta'/'Light Force'/'Escape' | 52. 'Wanted: Monty Mole'/'Jet Pac'/'Pud Pud in Weird World' |
| 43. 'Jasper!'/'Green Beret' | 53. 'Android Two'/'Thanatos' |
| 44. 'Fred'/'Maziacs' | |

A couple of the cartridges had extra games on them when room allowed. I couldn't fit more than two game titles on the thin label that was affixed to the edge of the cartridge because they were so small so only rediscovered the extra titles years later when I dug them out and was testing them out to see which Microdrive cartridges still worked. One of the games I found was an unreleased Spectrum game called '*Popie*' written by Simon Freeman and Dave Hayhoe. The game had been written in 1984 so was from a time before my tenure at Ocean. I had been having a nose about at work and found a tape that had been left lying about from a few years before. The authors must have sent it in to Ocean for evaluation and then it had lain forgotten waiting for nosey Mark Jones to find it. Luckily, I had the forethought to press the little red button on my '*Multiface*' and save off a copy. Once I got it running many years later I realised there was no record of it anywhere. I had managed to keep the only copy of it in existence so ensured it was properly preserved and put on the internet for other people to look at and try out.

(<https://spectrumcomputing.co.uk/entry/23479/ZX-Spectrum/Popie>)

Even though I was now approaching a year in Manchester I was still very homesick and still didn't feel like it was home. I actually left Ocean briefly over Christmas for a few weeks and tried again at Elite to see if they'd employ me on a freelance basis. I was afforded an interview at their headquarters in Walsall on Wednesday 2 December at 3:30pm. I was unsuccessful, the boundaries! That was due to the fact I still wanted to work from Northampton, it had nothing to do with my actual skills. I did a few weeks work back at NHCC over the busy Christmas period to earn a few pounds and to keep me busy and witnessed how successful U.S.Gold's conversion of the Sega arcade game '*Out Run*' was selling. The shop sold bucket loads of the title on all the formats it had been released for. Every few days we'd get another few boxes full of fresh copies of the game. As soon as we got them in they flew out the door. U.S.Gold had nailed the Christmas market that year with their conversions.

On Tuesday 22 December 1987 all Ocean employees attended the Ocean Christmas party which took place at The Midland Hotel in Manchester, just across the road from the Ocean offices. Even though I'd left I was still invited to the party and travelled up for the night. I don't really remember much about the evening due to not being able to handle my drink and everybody had copious amounts that night as the bar was free for the duration of the evening. All I can recall about the night now is seeing Ocean boss David Ward kicking his legs to the Frank Sinatra song '*New York, New York*' and the carnage in the men's toilets during the tail end of the party. All the toilets and sinks were blocked and overflowing with vomit and Simon Butler took on the role of responsible adult by rolling his sleeves up and plunging his arm in to the sinks swirling with pewk thus unblocking them with his fingers. The sight of this foulness was too much for me to bear and I had to leave as it was making me retch. I'd also been thinking a lot about my situation since leaving Ocean and it didn't take long for me to work out that I was missing the buzz of working there. During the evening I told Gary that I'd been a bit too hasty about leaving and had made a mistake. I asked politely if I could come back after the festive period was over and carry on where I'd left of. Thankfully Gary let me. Due to the state we left The Midland Hotel in that night Ocean Software were banned from ever having a party there again.

ZX Spectrum games I worked on in 1987:

(Title, label, retail price, '*Crash*' issue number & date - overall score gained)

1. '**Never Go with Strangers**' (aka '**Say No to Strangers**') – Thetford Crime Prevention Panel, price unknown, no reviews – Loading screen.

2. **'Road Race'** by Ocean – Amended the name of the game on the already completed loading screen on this rejected conversion of Konami's 'Hyper Rally'. Given away with the May 1987 issue of 'Your Sinclair' magazine.
3. **'Arkanoid'** by Imagine, £7.95, issue 39, April 1987 – 59% – Music.
4. **'Mag Max'** by Imagine, £7.95, issue 42, July 1987 – 67% – Loading screen.
5. **'Tai-Pan'** by Ocean, £7.95, issue 43, August 1987 – *Crash Smash* 93% – Loading screen.
6. **'Mutants'** by Ocean, £7.95, issue 43, August 1987 – 58% – Loading screen.
7. **'Wizball'** by Ocean, £7.95, issue 45, October 1987 – *Crash Smash* 92% – All in-game graphics and loading screen.
8. **'Platoon'** by Ocean, £9.95, issue 50, March 1988 – *Crash Smash* 93% – Some design elements.

ZX Spectrum software bought in 1987:

(Title, label, price paid, 'Crash' issue number & date - overall score gained)

Other than the first title I failed to keep hold of many of my receipts in 1987 thus the exact date of purchase for any of the following titles is unknown. They were all either bought from NHCC on my weekend's back home in Northampton or from Microbyte, the games shop that was situated in Manchester's Arndale Centre, during my lunch breaks at Ocean.

1. **'Zub'** by Mastertronic, £2.70 (10% discount) from NHCC, 10 January, issue 36, Christmas Special 1986-87 – 79%.
2. **'W.A.R.'** by Martech, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 35, December 1986 – 68%.
3. **'Hyberbowl'** by Mastertronic, 79p from NHCC, Saturday 10 January, no *Crash* review.
4. **'Future Games'** by Mastertronic, £1.00 from NHCC, Monday 12 January, no *Crash* review.
5. **'Elevator Action'** by Quicksilva, £4.95 from NHCC, Saturday 7 February 1987, issue 31, February 1987 – 72%.
6. **'Impossaball'** by Hewson Consultants, £8.95 from Microbyte, issue 37, February 1987 – 89%.
7. **'Agent-X'** by Mastertronic, £1.99 from Microbyte, issue 37, February 1987 – 85%.
8. **'Ranarama'** by Hewson Consultants, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 38, March 1987 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
9. **'Shockway Rider'** by Faster Than Light, £7.95 from NHCC, issue 38, March 1987 – 67%.
10. **'Dragon's Lair II: Escape from Singe's Castle'** by Software Projects, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 39, April 1987 – 83%.
11. **'Bomb Jack II'** by Elite, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 39, April 1987 – 71%.
12. **'Amaurote'** by Mastertronic, £2.99, issue 40, May 1987 – *Crash Smash* 94%.
13. **'Rasterscan'** by Mastertronic, £1.99, issue 40, May 1987 – 75%.
14. **'Enduro Racer'** by Activision, £9.99 from Microbyte, issue 40, May 1987 – *Crash Smash* 92%.

15. **'Nemesis the Warlock'** by Martech, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 40, May 1987 – 61%.
16. **'Auf Wiedersehen Monty'** by Gremlin Graphics, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 40, May 1987 – 85%.
17. **'Gunrunner'** by Hewson Consultants, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 41, June 1987 – 55%.
18. **'Barbarian: The Ultimate Warrior'** by Palace, £9.99 from Microbyte, issue 41, June 1987 – 85%.
19. **'Zynaps'** by Hewson Consultants, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 42, July 1987 – *Crash Smash* 91%.
20. **'Stormbringer'** by Mastertronic Added Dimension, £2.99, issue 42, July 1987 – 86%.
21. **'Exolon'** by Hewson Consultants, £7.95, issue 43, August 1987 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
22. **'Flash Gordon'** by Mastertronic Added Dimension, £2.99 from NHCC, issue 43, August 1987 – 42%.
23. **'Sidewize'** by Firebird, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 44, September 1987 – 50%.
24. **'Hysteria'** by Software Projects, £8.95 from Microbyte, issue 45, October 1987 – 78%.
25. **'Motos'** by Mastertronic Added Dimension, £2.99, issue 45, October 1987 – 74%.
26. **'Thundercats'** by Elite, £7.95 from NHCC, issue 46, November 1987 – *Crash Smash* 91%.
27. **'Supernova'** by Players, £1.99 from Microbyte, issue 46, November 1987 – 65%.
28. **'Jack the Nipper II: In Coconut Capers'** by Gremlin Graphics, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 46, November 1987 – 87%.
29. **'Through The Trap Door'** by Piranha, £8.95 from NHCC, issue 47, December 1987 – 70%.
30. **'Nebulus'** by Hewson Consultants, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 47, December 1987 – 85%.
31. **'Driller'** by Incentive, £14.95 from Microbyte, issue 47, December 1987 – *Crash Smash* 97%.
32. **'Dark Sceptre'** by Firebird, £7.95 from Microbyte, issue 47, December 1987 – 88%.
33. **'Slaine'** by Martech, £8.99 from Microbyte, issue 48, Christmas Special 1987-88 – 70%.
34. **'Out Run'** by U.S.Gold, £8.99 from NHCC, issue 49, February 1988 – 72%.

Full price releases = **24**
 Budget releases = **10**
 Total purchased = **34**
 Total spent = **£226.38**

In evidence here is a bit of a turnaround compared to the huge amount of software titles I had bought the previous year. The fact that my software buying had taken a step back this year was mainly due to the fact that I was now working in the games industry. I was making games in the day and I had little desire to go home and start playing the things. Also, some of the mystery and magic that I had felt towards ZX Spectrum games before had now gone, forever. I was taking part in creating new games so I was finding out how they were put together. The mystery had vanished and nothing felt as amazing as it had before when I hadn't got a clue how these things were produced. I was looking at ZX Spectrum games differently too with a more professional eye. When

playing a game I wasn't thinking "This is fun to play!" as I used to anymore. I was thinking "That loading screen is pretty good" or "That animation is awful". I didn't do it on purpose. I couldn't help it. I was also getting a free supply of new Ocean and Imagine releases. All I had to do was walk up the stairs to the Ocean offices on the second floor of the building and speak to one of the sales team and they'd let me have a nose through the big grey metal cabinet they had up there stocked with all the company's latest titles. I was allowed to take one of whatever I wanted as long as I didn't take the mickey and take loads. I took two copies of any game I had produced the graphics for and one copy if I had just had a hand in it. For example, if I had just drawn the loading screen. When a game was finished that I thought was particularly good, like *'Head Over Heels'*, *'Renegade'*, *'Target: Renegade'* and *'The Great Escape'* then I would politely nab one of those too.

Of the thirty-two titles purchased this year ten of them were budget games, my favourites being the two titles by the Pickford Brothers. *'Amaurote'* really was worth getting if you had a 128k Spectrum just so you could see and hear all the gorgeous added extras. There was a 128k only animated sequence at the start showing the character you controlled getting into his vehicle and the inevitable extra AY music and sound effects. *'Zub'* was an amazingly simple but furiously addictive game that had, seemingly, built on the old Imagine game, *'Jumping Jack'* from 1983. Again, wonderful 128k extras gave the game a polish not normally afforded to budget titles.

Of the full price titles *'W.A.R.'* was a shoot 'em up and bought because all the magazines had been going on about how smooth the scrolling was and how beautiful it all looked. Once I had bought the game and got it loaded up I was a little disappointed. The scrolling play area was so tiny it didn't leave much room for manoeuvring away from the enemies bullets. The small size of the area that the ZX Spectrum was actually moving about made the silky-smooth scrolling possible as it wasn't actually moving that much.

I had fun with *'Impossaball'*. Being able to move in and out of the screen as well as left and right was a new feature to experience. It was released at a time when finding any originality in games was rare so it was refreshing to see an idea that no one had really tried before. *'Driller'* was a ground breaker and really was a title that heralded the way forward with its free roaming 3D landscape. We really hadn't seen anything like this before. I'd been keeping an eye on the previews and reading how mind-blowing it apparently was. It was ahead of its time really as, once loaded up and running, the game was painfully slow. The ZX Spectrum just couldn't handle it and playing it could be a bit of a bind due to the speed it took to do anything. It did pave the way forward though and should be credited as such.

I bought *'Ranarama'* as I was still a massive fan of Steve Turner due to his *'Legend of Avalon'* and *'Dragontorc'* games and bought it on the strength of his reputation. I must admit I was a little disappointed with it. I didn't really get the hang of it all. I didn't get very far and had grown a little tired of games that looked like *'Gauntlet'*. Sorry Steve – I'm still a massive fan though.

I thought *'Dragon's Lair II: Escape from Singe's Castle'* was great but I think my judgment had been clouded by the some of the best 128k music I had ever heard. The tunes were written by Rob Hubbard but, frustratingly, they sped up, slowed down and faded in and out while they are playing. I'm sure this wasn't supposed to happen, and it nearly ruined the whole game for me. I don't think any other 128k ZX Spectrum game had better music at the time and sometimes I would just leave the game on so I could listen to the music. It would also act as the main reason for me to get further into the game as each new level had its own musical accompaniment. I wanted to see what further aural delights were coming next so spent more time than usual trying to see the later levels.

I bought *'Hysteria'* as I knew it was ex-Ocean staffer Joffa Smith's latest game. I had seen an early version of it at Ocean that Special FX boss Paul Finnegan had brought in to show us. It obviously used an upgraded *'Cobra'* engine, as both games looked a bit similar. The graphics and sound were great and the three-layer parallax scrolling was super smooth.

'Nebulus' was a breath of fresh air. There was nothing else like it game-wise and was addictive to play yet frustratingly hard. The aim of the game was to get your little creature to reach the top of these revolving towers. It was tough though. I'd always make a silly mistake just as I was reaching the top which sent me toppling back down to the bottom again. Whenever the top of the tower was in sight, I'd run out of time too before reaching it! This was one game that really did make me want to smash my ZX Spectrum up, so I'd have to stop playing before I actually did any real damage to it or gave myself an aneurysm.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1987:

Andy Warhol – 22 February.

Fred Astaire – 22 June.

Michael Staniforth – 31 July.

Lee Marvin – 29 August.

Eamonn Andrews – 5 November.

Irene Handl – 29 November.

Chapter 10: 26 December 2016

Graham Wilson interview

(co-owner of the Northampton Home Computer Centre)

Graham set up Northampton Home Computer Centre (NHCC) with business partner Ken Lower in the town in the early 80s and it was one of the very first shops in the area dedicated to selling computers, games and all the various peripherals. It was here where I saw, for the first time, the huge range of games that were available for the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC, Commodore 16, BBC and Electron machines. I spent many hours here, after school and during Saturday walks into town, browsing the shelves and meeting new friends in the staff who worked there and various customers who I had got to know. For a few years the shop became the focal point for my social life. When the shop wasn't open I was hanging out with the staff and people I'd met through it.

NHCC was first based at 58A Wellingborough Road where it sat next to a taxi cab company. While working at the Co-Op this was where I came, at least three to four times a week, to see what new games had been released and what I could spend my £10 a week wages on. Later, when the shop got busier, I was given employment, firstly on Saturdays while I was still at school, then later, after I'd left school, I was employed full-time. Other than the two business owners Karl Morton, Conrad Bedford and Chris Herbert worked there full-time. Ken's wife Doreen did the odd shift there as a cleaner and Steve Knight was employed to help Ken and Karl fix the various pieces of hardware customer's brought in that had ceased to work properly and needed repairing. Other boys employed for the busier Saturdays included Graham's son Paul, Jason Gould and his brother Nathan. In 1986 the shop moved to larger premises a bit further in to Northampton town centre, on the opposite side of the road, at 13A Abington Square. I left from there, at the end of January 1987, to go and work at Ocean Software. On my weekends back at home in Northampton I would, more often than not, pop in if I was in town and fill them in on my week just gone at Ocean. When my time at Ocean came to an end and my freelancing wasn't going as I had envisaged, Graham and Ken had me back as Chris was about to leave as he had a new job, for which I will always be very grateful. The shop closed for good in April 2009.

In 2016 I got in touch with Graham, after not having seen him for over ten years, to see if he minded answering a few questions about the shop.

Mark Jones: "How did you and Ken Lower meet? Had you known each other long before you set up the shop?"

Graham Wilson: "Yes, I met Ken when we were both in engineering. Ken was working on the shop floor in engineering. I was working in the offices and we were both working at a company called Brown Brothers."

MJ: "What is 'engineering'?"

GW: "It's where you make things with metal generally, not always. Computers can be engineered. Software is engineered. This was physical engineering where you turn things, you made screws and hand brakes, crook locks. Do you remember crook locks? I used to make them."

MJ: "What time period would this have been?"

GW: "I'd just moved to Northampton really. That's the difficulty, remembering those sort of figures really. Somewhere around the mid-70s. So we were working at Brown Brothers and so was Ken and we formed a chess team. Well, we were in two chess teams and he was part of the chess team. So we met via the chess team."

MJ: "What series of events transpired to make you start the business? What was the original idea? Was the initial idea to sell games or computers or both? I remember you also sold machines for businesses like PC's and PCW's and Printers. What was the original priority, business or home computers?"

GW: "It came about because we were both interested in doing business together. We'd both done a little engineering business that didn't work well. Then Ken had the idea. Ken was always in to computing things so Ken wanted to open up a shop. So, we decided to look for a shop. Me and Ken and this other guy who was also involved in the other company. He had another company so those two people were the thirds. I had a third, Ken had a third and this other person had a third initially. It was mainly Ken's idea behind it, to open up a computer shop and that's what we did with 58A and we were really part-time when it started, our wives were running it, basically, and we were all still working and it built up so Ken could stop working so he went full-time and it built up so that I could go to it full-time. That's how it started."

MJ: "So were you aiming to cover the home computer market?"

GW: "It was always aimed at the ZX81 and ZX Spectrum. The ZX81 really is where we were, with the games. That fuelled it."

MJ: "When did the shop open? Was it busy when you first started or did you see a steady growth in sales?"

GW: "It built up because we were both doing part-time at first."

MJ: "I was aware of the shop at the beginning of 1984 so you'd probably been there a while before that."

GW: "The actual start date I can't remember. I might be able to look up some old documents and find out but I don't really remember."

MJ: "Around sometime around 1982/83?"

GW: "I'm just thinking back to my age. My boy had just been born, not long before. So he would have been about two and he's 40 in January so if you can work that out?"

MJ: "So he was born in 1977?"

GW: "Yeah."

MJ: "So the shop had opened much earlier than I thought then?"

GW: "About when he was one, two or three. So yes*."

*(So that would be 1981 at the latest! I don't personally remember the shop being there that early, I could be mistaken though. There is an old, almost empty, website for Northants Computer Centre still online at time of writing (<http://www.nccnet.co.uk/index.html>) that states 'Established in 1982'. That information would have been fresher than Graham's memory is now (either him or Ken supplied the date for the site anyway) when it was put on that page so we'll go with that date for the shop opening. 1982.

MJ: "How much of a risk did you think the whole idea was? Yours was the first shop in Northampton to sell just computers and games. There was talk that that the whole 'home computer' craze was just a passing phase and wouldn't last and the bubble would, eventually, burst."

GW: "We didn't consider the risks. We just wanted to start a shop together really and that seemed a good idea. I remember when we were getting the shop ready, we were broken into the first week before we'd actually opened up. They broke through the sky light and took half the stock."

MJ: "What did they steal? What sort of stock did you have back then?"

GW: "I really can't remember. Computer bits and bobs, printers and things like that all went."

MJ: "Was it easy to find distributors who stocked the items you wanted to sell at the beginning. Did Centresoft/Leisuresoft exist at this point because it was still a bit hobbyist at this point?"

GW: "We found a couple of distributors yes. Centresoft and Leisuresoft. Leisuresoft was started by Richard Reeves."

MJ: "Didn't Richard have a shop too? Because wasn't there another games shop, later on, the other side of town? Was that Richard Reeves?"

GW: "Well Richard Reeves came on the back of us didn't he. Richard got very friendly with Ken. Basically, when the Amstrad's were around, the 1512's and 1640's. Richard Reeves started in hi-fi. He had a shop.."

MJ: "Was it in Gold Street?"

GW: "Oh that was later. His first shop was on the Kettering Road. As you get near the town centre there's a crossroads and his shop was just there on that crossroads on the left-hand side of there. His second shop was at Weston Favell Shopping Centre. So, he got friendly with Ken and that's when we did mail order together and Richard Reeves sort of stitched us up a little bit."

MJ: "So this was the bloke who started Leisuresoft?"

GW: "Yes he started Leisuresoft. He was forever starting businesses. He started another company just selling computers and that went bust owing hundreds of thousands."

MJ: "I formed lasting memories about the shop and it was a huge part of that time period for me. Did you realise at the time how much an effect and influence it would have on teenagers of the time? Whenever I speak to someone who was a regular customer they all comment on how great a place it was. No one ever says, "Oh I thought it was awful!""

GW: "We always tried hard and we had all these parents coming saying "These computers are rubbish" and we'd say "No, they're thinking, they're learning to solve problems on the computers". That's what I'd tell the parents. Kids were solving problems all the time."

MJ: "I learned about Celtic mythology because I was playing '*Tir Na Nog*' on the Spectrum and I learned a lot more about history, from '*Valhalla*' and things like that, than I did at school."

GW: "It was a good educational tool. They should have embraced it a lot more for education."

MJ: "How much did playground software piracy affect the shop do you think? There's the argument that because kids could get an instant software library by copying their friend's games that more computers were bought in the first place. You could argue that just because someone had a copy of '*Sherlock*' on the Spectrum for free it didn't mean that, if they didn't have access that copy, they would necessarily have gone out and bought an original for £14.95. So, in reality, a sale wasn't lost, but that child may not have asked for a computer in the first place if it wasn't possible to get free games from their friends. I looked at which games I bought and as I earned more money – in 1986 I spent nearly £500 on computer games..."

GW: (Laughs)

MJ: "...because I worked at the Co-Op.."

GW: "Oh jeez!"

MJ: "...but I also had a lot of copies as well but that didn't stop me from buying games as well when I had the money."

GW: "I don't think copying affected it too much. You've got copying going on now in business software. They're always trying to stamp it out. They never will succeed. I don't believe they will succeed. They're always trying to get round it. In those days, yes, copying went on but it was hard work. There's lots of nice people around who don't mind spending money and keep themselves legal and that's what you rely upon. Like you, you had some legal, you had some illegal."

MJ: "But that was it, I had a tape with a load of games on and I'd perhaps load them once or twice but that didn't mean, because I had a copy of it, that if I didn't have that, I'd have gone out and spent £7.95 on it."

GW: "It's the same in the music industry. People have always copied CDs or copied their tapes. It happens. But it hasn't destroyed the music industry has it? Copying hasn't destroyed the DVD industry. It hasn't destroyed the games industry. In fact, I think it makes it a little bit stronger because you get a bigger base of users. I probably shouldn't be telling you that because it's illegal! I don't think it destroyed it at all."

MJ: "When you were at the shop did you ever come across commercial piracy?"

GW: "No."

MJ: "By that I mean a set up that was producing fakes made to look like original software."

GW: "Never."

MJ: "But it did happen. There's a TV documentary called '*Commercial Breaks*' which is about Ocean and Imagine where it shows Imagine going bust and David Ward, the boss at Ocean, goes to Bury market and he's holding an original copy of '*Hunchback*' and somebody was selling a pirated version of the same game with a colour photocopied inlay and a printed label on the tape. Did you ever come across that then?" (https://youtu.be/ChmQBK_EaUQ?t=926)

GW: "I never came across that. But I don't think companies go bust because of that. They go bust really because, I mean, mine did the same, because you don't move on with the times. You've got to make people want to buy and Ocean obviously stopped making things that people wanted to buy at the end of the day, didn't they?"

MJ: "What happened with Ocean was that to make a game you had to spend so much money and so much time. In the 8-bit days a game would take three months. In the mid-90s a game could take two years so they'd have huge teams working on one game but they'd have no new product to put out while they were doing it to bring in any income."

GW: "I know but if at the end their product wasn't very good and a lot of times it wasn't very good, was it? There's an awful lot of games where they spent a lot of time and effort and the product really wasn't very good."

MJ: "Yes. Ocean went through an awful period around 1986 because they didn't have enough in-house staff to deal with the games so it was going to out-of-house development teams who ended up delivering awful games which is one of the reasons why I got a job because Gary Bracey, the fellow who was employed to sort out all that mess, brought it all in-house."

GW: "Yes. But you can see what I mean, that's what people get wrong. It doesn't help them but I don't think it's the end of the world. I mean, you haven't seen the end of DVD production because people copy them. Or records. It's just their products were wrong, I think."

MJ: "Did you think chain stores like Boots and WHSmiths offered much competition?"

GW: "Not Boots and WHSmiths, no. What happened was with Game and PC World. They were the

two that...they started about both at the same time. Game sales went down dramatically for us (laughs) to the point it was almost not worth selling games. I think they got much better deals from the software companies as well."

MJ: "Why? Because they bought in bulk?"

GW: "Erm, no. I think the better deal was that if they didn't sell something, they could send it back. We didn't have that."

MJ: "Sale or return."

GW: "Yes. Sale or return. They were so big. I wouldn't like to guarantee that but that's what I think happened. They could send things back because of their buying power. We couldn't. So, if we bought some bad things we couldn't sell we were stuck with them. Whereas they just sent them back."

MJ: "Well it's a bit like what happened with Spinadisc, would you say? With the big chain stores and the fact people were downloading their music illegally made Spinadisc suffer. They were there from 1967."

GW: "That wasn't just Spinadisc though was it? Lots and lots of record sellers were closing down."

MJ: "Yes. Independent record stores."

GW: "Also, because people were buying mail order as well. Mail order came along."

MJ: "You mean via the internet? Amazon?"

GW: "Yes. Amazon and downloading music sites. Were they just starting then when Spinadisc went down?"

MJ: "Yes."

GW: "And people were getting back into records."

MJ: "When Spinadisc shut down there was a thing called '*Napster*' as well where you could type the name of a song in and it would download an mp3 of it for free."

GW: "Nobody paid a penny! So, they've stopped all that now, I think. That was over the top copying but Spinadisc was slowly going down anyway wasn't it? If it had carried now then they would have been selling quite a lot on the vinyl side of things."

MJ: "Yes. It's had a resurgence recently hasn't it."

GW: "I personally don't like vinyl. I don't like using it."

MJ: "No I don't really either. I don't like listening to crackles. Even on the cleanest vinyl you can still hear that it's a vinyl record."

GW: "I've had this discussion with people who love vinyl. They say you hear the depth of sound. But it crackles! (Both laugh) And you have to replace the needle every so often and if you don't the needle destroys the record. You're only going to get a hundred or two hundred plays out of a record or something like that. It's a no brainer almost. I think Amazon have got it right because you can actually buy the vinyl record but they give you a link to download the digital version don't they. Is that Amazon? So that's the best way. You buy the record and you don't use it and you download the real stuff to listen to."

MJ: "You keep the record itself nice and pristine."

GW: "Yeah that's the way forward (laughs)."

MJ: "Can you tell me, was there any one main reason that contributed to the decision to move the shop to the bigger Abington Square premises?"

GW: "Buying the Abington Square premises was a difficult decision. We'd been looking for a bigger shop basically. The Abington Square shop had been on the market for a long while, it was actually a not very good shop. It had water dripping; all the stairs were rotten. We had to have new stairs put in. It had a bathroom upstairs that we took out. But it was a lot bigger which is what we wanted. We wanted a lot bigger. Plus, the fact we were going to own it. 58A we rented. The people who rented 58A and 58B wanted to open a pub so they bought the leases back off us."

MJ: "So you had to move then?"

GW: "No. We'd already planned to move but it coincided with the fact that we'd actually sold the lease to someone else and they came along and said, "Look we don't want you to sell it to them, we'll buy it back off you because we want to bring them both together as a pub". You'll see now, there's a big pub there, the old 58A and 58B, brought together. So, what's how it went. We decided we wanted to buy, we wanted to have bricks and mortar and it gave us a lot more space."

MJ: "Yes it was much bigger. Did you use the very top floor even? I remember the highest floor just being empty."

GW: "Yeah it was empty. Later on, I rented it all out. We actually had NCCNet Limited. Do you remember that? Was it before or after your time?"

MJ: "After."

GW: "Yes. That was an internet provider. We provided an ISP. We used to run it from the second floor down. Three floors up we used to have a load of computers in there, in the day when your internet used to run via the telephone with a modem. So, we had quite a few computers there, dealing with all that. People dialling dial ups. We used to act as hosts to an awful lot of people's websites and their email all upstairs. So that's how that one went. So, there was the shop, then the repairs, then the office and then we had the internet room."

MJ: "Around Autumn 1987 the Nintendo NES and the Sega Master System were launched in the UK. NHCC chose to stock to the Sega machine, which was distributed via Mastertronic, and, if I recall correctly, if you chose to stock one you had to sign an agreement not to stock the other."

GW: "I don't remember that no."

MJ: "I never saw an NES back in the day anywhere that I can remember. Yet I saw loads of Master Systems. Can you recall the reason you chose to go with Sega?"

GW: "Not really no. I think we just chose the one that was easy to get hold of. We could never sell BBCs because we could never get the franchise to sell BBCs until near the end of the machine's life."

MJ: "So what went on then? I never realised until you said that, that Northants Computer Centre never sold BBCs."

GW: "Not until the very end when Acorn were struggling to sell BBCs then they opened out to everyone. BBCs weren't distributed. You had to be a bigger shop to get BBCs."

MJ: "When the Atari ST's and Commodore Amiga's started to become popular around 1989/1990

how easy was it for the shop to adjust to the jump from 8-bit to 16-bit computers?"

GW: "Oh! Lovely, easy! Yeah, I mean, that's what people wanted. We sold what people wanted really. So, going back to your last question, it was probably what people wanted. Not what we wanted. We didn't try and be a market leader. We sold people what they wanted, tried to, more than anything. They wanted ZX81s when we first started. We sold loads and loads of bits for the ZX81, so the ZX81 could drive machine tools. The ZX Spectrum, the same. We sold lots of add-ons, bits where you could actually control machine tools. One famous case, I used to work at Cosworth, and there was a guy there, who's dead now, Ben Rood, who designed a cam grinding machine."

MJ: "A what? Sorry?"

GW: "Engine cams. You know cams on the car? Cosworth used to make racing engines didn't they. So, it's very difficult making cams on an engine because you've got to make a big five ton model of it accurately. Then you use that to grind the cam. Very time consuming whereas if you do it on computer it's all... So, Ben Rood designed this cam grinder machine using a ZX Spectrum and a BBC computer. One drove the head in and out and the other one did the measuring and they interacted with each other. That's got to be a first."

MJ: "How did the change in the early 90s from keyboard-based computers to consoles affect the shop? Did you sell the Play Station and SNES?"

GW: "We tried to. It really didn't go very well for us, really."

MJ: "I'd heard that the mark-ups weren't very high on them."

GW: "The mark-ups weren't very high but, again, it was getting hold of the kit which was the problem. They seem to be limited to the bigger companies, again."

MJ: "Right. So the bigger companies were.."

GW: "Were getting all the kit, basically."

MJ: "And squeezing out.."

GW: "Yeah. You got very limited supplies. Very, very limited supplies. When you got them they were very limited. Then we had Amstrad come along didn't we. Anyone could get hold of Amstrads. Then Amstrad bought the Sinclair Spectrum didn't they. That was the worst bit of kit ever."

MJ: "But, again, that led to more people buying a Spectrum, when they brought out the +2 because a lot of the titles were budget games. (There was a) huge amount sold then. I think it was because, when parents went out to buy a machine they didn't have to buy a joystick interface, a joystick and a separate cassette recorder. They'd just buy the whole thing in one go, all in a big box."

GW: "There was two things wrong with that. One, the cassette recorders were inherently unreliable. You had to have a really good tape recorder, and then they didn't last that long. So to have one built in almost obsoleted your computer."

MJ: "That was it, because if your tape recorder goes wrong then you've got to take the whole lot back. Whereas before, if the tape recorder was faulty you could just go and replace the player."

GW: "Going on to that concept, I remember the first Christmas that we sold that +2 machine, every one we sold came back to us and we had to ship them back to Amstrad."

MJ: "Every one?"

GW: "Virtually every one came back to us. Because of the tape recorder."

MJ: "Right, so that must have been a headache!"

GW: "I spoke to Mr Amstrad's son, who was Quality Controller at Amstrad at this stage. I said, "What are you going to do about it?" He replied, "Nothing!" I said, "Right! We're not going to sell another one" and we never did."

MJ: "Not one?"

GW: "I said, "We're not going to sell another one of your computers if that's your attitude!" We never did. I refused to have them in the shop. Their quality was so poor. Every one! Imagine opening your Christmas present. Your Amstrad's there and it won't load the games. We had every one come back and that was a lot of computers. So we weren't very happy with them... (both laugh) ...at the time. I still remember answering to Alan Sugar's son who was in Quality Control and his attitude was just, it was awful. We hadn't got a problem with the computers."

MJ: "Well yes. That's not what had gone wrong. It was the tape recorders!"

GW: "And the concept of building a tape recorder in to a computer was basically flawed unless you could replace it easily."

MJ: "What was the main reason the shop closed?"

GW: "Oh, finally closing?"

MJ: "Yes."

GW: "Well I took certain decisions really and, one, I closed the downstairs shop because we were more business orientated at that stage. We were doing lots more business stuff. We actually didn't need shop too much. People were coming in to the shop and browsing to buy things but never bought anything. They'd buy it on-line. So we stopped doing demonstrations."

MJ: "So you'd demo a game for them. Then they'd say, "Oh I'll leave it" and go and buy it on-line?"

GW: "You'd demo a computer. Demo a printer. A lot of the time they'd just go and buy it elsewhere. So doing demos was a waste of time."

MJ: "So you were selling machines for people who were selling on-line?"

GW: "Yes. You'd give them all this advice free of charge and then they'd go and buy it somewhere else. Not 100% of the time but quite a lot of the time. Plus the fact we were doing more business to business users. It was just far more reliable work. You don't really need a shop to sell business (software). The passing trade had gone down. We didn't get anywhere near as much passing trade coming in and, plus, the fact I got Subway to sub-let which was almost a no-brainer. I got loads of money from Subway which I didn't have to work for, as in rent. As it were. Plus the fact that put the value of the shop up. Enormously. Which meant I sold the shop about a year later (laughs), basically. So if you sub-let to a major company, a PLC, you know, where they're guaranteed rent, the value of the property goes up. To finish the story off, we were doing really well, did lots and lots of business upstairs and everyone was happy. I was getting rid of downstairs then you had the financial crash. Do you remember the financial crash where people just stopped buying? From January, February, March 2007 we hardly sold anything. Really just did not sell hardly anything and I had a lot of bills come in March. I had VAT. I had wages. I had a heap load of bills and it was pretty obvious I'd have to take a big, big loan to carry on which I had to personally guarantee or I had to stop trading. So I took the decision to stop trading really which wasn't very good for the people involved. I still had a to pay a lot of money to the bank to pay off an overdraft. It had gone

from a small overdraft to a really, really big overdraft. The level of business we were getting over January, February, March I couldn't see any way we could pay that overdraft off."

MJ: "Is there anything you would have done differently that could have extended the life of the company in the changing landscape of computers?"

GW: "We should have gone with business computers a lot earlier. I should have employed more people who'd have done more business orientated sales. None of us were very good at sales were we? I'm certainly not a salesman."

MJ: "(laughs) You did alright."

GW: "I'm not a salesman (laughs). We should have employed a salesman to go in to the business area. You look at so many companies now who've done that. They were much better at doing their selling to the business arena. The business arena is a lot more stable. That's what we should have done. The games side, in truth, on the game side, I lost a lot of interest in the games once PC World and Game (opened) and the quality of games went down enormously at one stage. They were expected to buy crap weren't they. They really were."

MJ: "I remember in the Amiga and ST years there was an awful lot of rubbish.."

GW: "Awful lot of rubbish."

MJ: "And they were always in huge boxes."

GW: "They were over-hyped. Enormously over-hyped. And you'd buy something in and you couldn't sell them. And you couldn't send them back. You were just stuck with them. So you were stuck with lots of crap. But I'm very sure the big companies were able to send them back. So, what's what done us on games. Getting hold of games consoles really wasn't very easy as well for us. So yeah, probably a lot of bad decisions on my part. So I wasn't very good. I enjoyed life though (laughs). The people who have worked for me... "

MJ: "Yes. I mean I look back on it with fondness."

GW: "Yes."

MJ: "It was a good place to work. It was an exciting time. Especially between 1985 and 1987 as it was all starting up."

GW: "We were really busy. Ever so busy at one stage then it all faded gently and I really didn't know how to deal with that, easily. It's fine."

MJ: "How do you look back on it all now though?"

GW: "I enjoyed it. I couldn't work for anyone now. I've had three interviews in my life for a job. Three. That's it. Totally. Once when I was an apprentice. I'm still getting a pension for that. It's £10.38 per annum! My pension from my first job. £10.38! (laughs). Then when I moved to Northampton the second interview. Then went to Cosworth, third interview. Now I've been on my own since."

MJ: "Alright. Thanks for the answering the questions Graham."

Chapter 11: 1988
**“..the cans contents ended up all over the carpet,
walls and ceiling of Mr. Bracey's office!” –**
Ocean Software year two.

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'Good Morning Vietnam' – Barry Levinson, 15 January.
- 'Biloxi Blues' – Mike Nichols, 25 March.
- 'Beetlejuice' – Tim Burton, 30 March.
- 'Willow' – Ron Howard, 20 May.
- 'Killer Klowns from Outer Space' – Stephen Chiodo, 27 May.
- 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' – Robert Zemeckis, 22 June.
- 'Coming to America' – John Landis, 28 June.
- 'Pumpkinhead' – Stan Winston, 14 October.

Over the festive period Mum and Dad had been in back in touch with an old family friend called Pat who had two children called Martine and Pierre, who were both around my age. Mum and Dad had been friends with Pat in the mid-70s when she was married to her children's dad, Colin, and we'd gone on holiday with all four of them around 1974. Pat now lived in a small market town called Chorley, which was 19.5 miles from Manchester, a commutable distance for work. Mum had mentioned to her about me moving back to work in Manchester and Pat had offered up the sofa bed in her back room to me to sleep on. So a move back up north followed and I ended up kipping at her house Monday to Thursday night and continued to go home to Northampton on the Friday night for the weekend. Ocean musician Jonathan Dunn commuted to and from Preston each day so we'd both walk to Victoria Station and get on the same train after work. I'd disembark at Chorley and say goodbye to Jon as he carried on to Preston which was a few stops after.

This living arrangement worked well at first but, after a few weeks, Pierre started to try and wind me up almost every night and eventually I lost my rag with him when he stuck a paper spike right through the front of a new biography I'd just bought on John Lennon by Ray Coleman, twice! It went right through the middle of John's face and left its mark right through to page 41! Why? Because he was bored, I was in his house and he thought he could do what he wanted probably. Pat did give him a right telling off, though I think it just went in one ear and out the other. I realised this set up wasn't working and that I'd have to soon start looking for somewhere else to live.

I had put all the graphic work for 'Gryzor' to bed in early November but the coding took quite a bit longer so the game wasn't released until the start of 1988. Around this time the reviews slowly started to appear in the magazines. 'Gryzor' had garnered a screenshot on the front cover of issue 69 from December 1987 of 'Sinclair User' along with the words "First Review" emblazoned above it. It received a glowing double page spread in that issue and received an overall mark of 9 out of 10. "Great", I thought. I was wholly pleased with that. I waited with some trepidation for, in my mind, the most important review from the mighty 'Crash' magazine. Were they going to *Smash* it? I really hoped so as I thought the game had turned out better than 'Wizball' and they'd *Smashed* that one. Eventually issue 49 from February 1988, which contained the anticipated review of 'Gryzor', arrived and I scoured the review index to see what page it was on (page 22 if you were wondering!) I thumbed nervously to the page. I gulped and my heart sank - 49%?! I really didn't expect that! As I read the write-up the kicks, slaps and punches assaulted me from the page:

"Gryzor is a poor game graphically."

"Unfortunately the addictive nature of the game is outweighed by the rubbish graphics."

"The graphics are poor and badly coloured with appalling animation"

...alright alright, you've made your point! I'd got my first poor review.

To add insult to injury my graphics had been awarded an overall mark of 45%, that's 4% less than the overall score the game had earned. To say I was a little gutted is an understatement. I couldn't work out why there was such a difference between the other glowing reviews and this one. How could everyone else like it so much and 'Crash' didn't and couldn't stop going on about how much they thought it was a load of old tosh? I pondered. Could it just be that the reviewers were in a bad mood? Or was there another reason for this appalling review? Could it possibly be that they were *really* pissed off over the fact that Paul didn't get the playable demo ready in time for their preview tape and were wreaking revenge in the only way they could? We hadn't promised a demo to any other magazine and they all loved it. Ocean had let 'Crash' down and could this have been the result? I'll never know for sure, after all this time it doesn't really matter anyway. The review wasn't put into my folder at the time. I quietly ignored this blemish on my graphics career, though I'm happy to say I'm over it now and I inserted a printout of it into my review folder a few years back, the wound having somewhat healed over the ensuing years. As a foot note I'd just like to add that the scathing original review made even less sense when three years later, in 1991, 'Gryzor' was re-released on Ocean's budget Hit Squad label. 'Crash' re-reviewed it and gave it a much better 82% in issue 66 from June of that year. Now, you can argue and say that the game got a better mark because it was now retailing at £2.99, but then advancements in ZX Spectrum games that had occurred over the past three years should have lowered the overall score as games in general had got bigger and better. I still think someone at 'Crash' had got the hump at the time of the original release and reflected that in their resultant review because of 'Demo-Gate'. I had to wait until next month for the next review when 'Your Sinclair' had given 'Gryzor' a Megagame award in issue 27 from March 1988 with another overall score of 9 out of 10. I was, again, well happy with that. Even Spanish magazine 'Micro Hobby' had devoted two whole pages to the game and given it good marks across the board. That was even better.

While lodging in Chorley I would occasionally rent a video for the night from the local video hire shop. It was here when I saw 'Hellraiser' had come out on VHS and really wanted to own my copy so I could watch it anytime I wanted. At first, the shop had loads of copies of the film that took up a whole shelf. As people rented it, watched it then brought it back demand for the film eventually dropped off. The shop would then sell its excess copies to make some money back and make way for newer releases. This was back when a rental video could cost around £150! I asked if they would be selling off any ex-rental copies and was told that they would soon be doing so. One VHS would set me back a whopping £75. Of course I agreed! I wanted to own a copy no matter what. While back in Northampton I did the same at a video shop down there just in case the shop in Chorley let me down (yes I know this sounds mental and I bet you've already guessed how this pans out). Again, an ex-rental would cost me around £75. A few weeks later I had a phone call from both shops telling me they had now put aside a copy of 'Hellraiser' on VHS for me for £75. Me being honest and not wanting to mess people around who had done me a favour and stuck to their word ended up buying both copies and paying £150 for the privilege of owning (twice!) 'Hellraiser' on secondhand VHS. Even though I was surrounded by film buffs at Ocean I didn't dare tell anyone what I'd done and how much money I'd spent. Had I done so then the 'taking of the Michael' would have never ended! Still, at least if one copy got chewed up by my video player I'd have a spare! In the end, neither were chewed and I eventually sold them both for a pittance at a car boot sale once it had been released on DVD. (I re-bought *yet* another ex-rental VHS in 2018 for a tenner to form part of a 'Hellraiser' display in my living room. I then found a copy of the sequel on the same format to complete the set. Madness!)

The new year brought a new ZX Spectrum game to work on. My next project was originally planned to be a follow up to Imagine's arcade conversion of 'Green Beret' from 1986 and was called, originally 'The Vindicator – Green Beret II'. The game was an original title and was to be designed by in-house artist Simon Butler. During the initial design meetings the game that was decided upon sounded very different to how it eventually turned out. The trouble was that Konami, when approached by Ocean for permission to use the 'Green Beret II' tag, asked for too much money for its use so that idea was thrown out of the window pretty early on but came too late for the Bob Wakelin artwork which had already been completed and delivered to Ocean and displayed the now unusable subtitle. This had to be covered up in the adverts printed in the magazines by the Ocean art department by utilising some strategically placed screenshots.

Very few design documents for any of Ocean's games have survived over the years. That's

not the case with 'The Vindicator' as I happened to keep hold of pretty much everything that was used in order to make the game. Reproduced here are the original ideas for it. The games' design wouldn't win any awards for originality nowadays but are nonetheless interesting to read. The following text is taken from the very earliest design documents from the first ever meeting held about the game:

Page 1:

"Green Beret 2 VERY ROUGH PLOT!

A secret weapon is being built in a cave under a mountain in Nicaragua. A troop of Green Berets is sent to find and defuse the weapon as it will soon be detonated and the future of the earth is in your hands. The plane runs into trouble and you and your comrades have to parachute out, you get separated and decide to do the mission by yourself. (Or summat like that!)"

Page 2:

"He parachutes down in Nicaragua.

Stage 1.

A war torn town centre, with bombed out buildings, dilapidated, smashed up cars lying around. Then the rebels appear. You find rocks, oil drums and grenades. Other people are hiding in buildings and jump out. A big baddy is near the entrance to a building, defeat him and then you can enter the building.

Stage 2.

Interior of blown up/dilapidated building. Some people (women) are sitting down, when they see you they get up and start on you. Pick up bottles etc. to throw at them. Big baddy near the other end of building then you get out.

Stage 3.

Village with saloons, bars, etc. Mexican type baddies with sombreros. Big baddy guards....nothing yet.

Stage 4.

Sand dunes, grass, occasional hut perhaps. Mountains in background. Baddies are bandits. Pick up knives, logs, rocks. Could cross a river and a rope bridge. Big baddy guards an entrance to a cave.

Stage 5.

In the tunnel that leads to cave containing nuclear detonator. The baddies are soldiers with guns. Kill baddy to reach detonator."

See, very rudimentary wasn't it. The next draft of the game contains a bit more detail and demonstrates how the admittedly rough initial thoughts for it were expanded on. It's also apparent that the bosses at Ocean wanted the title to take on the form of an unofficial clone of the 1987 arcade game 'Double Dragon' by Technōs, an arcade license Ocean had gone after but had lost out to Melbourne House, much to their annoyance. It reads:

| "Double Dragon | G/B | Green Beret II |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Street scene | Town | Street scene |
| Forest | Jungle | Mountains |
| Bridge/Broken | Bridge | Bridge |
| Conveyor belts | | Ravine |
| Lift | | Caves and Potholes |
| Climb Mts | Mts | Link to (Knife |
| Iron Bridge | Bridge G / B 1 | (Flamethrower |
| River | River | Turn to Skeletons when die |
| Holes in road | Potholes | River with crocodiles |

Climb fences
Jump boxes
Throw rocks
Traps in wall
Moving statues
Big end scene
Dynamite
Baseball bats
Oil drums
Whips
Knives
Boxes
Karate and Judo

Jaguars

Statues in temple
In temple/enemy base

Game starts with senator awaiting Santini (Green Beret) in Guadalupe. Hijacked by South American thugs and whisked away in motorcycle sidecar.

Green Beret arrives and chaos ensues.

Train goes through: Town to jungle to bridge (broken) to shanty town to mine to caves and potholes to mountains, temple (end).

5 sections.

1. Town. Bars, cantina, supply shops, alleys etc.
2. Jungle and bridge, men in trees, jaguars, crocs.
3. Mine and caves, potholes, gaps, stalactites.
4. Mountains, rocks, rockslide underfoot.
5. Temple.

Gaps in floor. Climb across holding on to rock face a la D/Dragon (in mountains).

Flamethrower found in caves. 3 shots only. Knife can be found. Stab or throw. Can't take knife into temple. Metal detectors will alert enemy.

Moving statues in temple (like D/Dragon). Spears/Clubs. Slabs fall from ceiling. Bridge mid-section collapses. Fall into piranhas. Water bubbles and skeleton rises up then sinks. Jaguars in jungle (stab, low kick or jump over). Wild bull. Jump over or crouch punch"

As you can see, if you've played 'The Vindicator', it all started out as something completely different to the game that eventually saw the light of day. The third draft of the design also survives and contains more details about how the game was then supposed to have taken shape:

Page 1:

"Green Beret

A female agent has infiltrated the HQ of El Lupe in San Miguel, a small god-forsaken hole in South America, but one where this tin-pot dictator has been holding some of the world's greatest brains, forcing them to build a neutron bomb.

While waiting to pass over the stolen blueprints and the exact location of the bomb, the voluptuous agent is overpowered and taken to El Lupe to be tortured.

Green Beret: Tony Santini, enters and finding his contact missing sets off to track her down and overthrow the crazed Latin dictator and strike a blow for freedom and democracy (Puke! Puke!)"

Page 2:

"Game has introductory sequence with female agent being captured by thugs and carried off screen.

First section – The town – Cantinas, bars, shops and alleys. Thugs (army types and greasy bandidos).

Second section – Jungle and river. Two rivers, one with bridge; which either has a broken mid-section or the middle collapses if walked on.

Second river has rocks to jump across.

Both rivers have either crocodiles or piranhas.

If piranhas get you, you sink, the water bubbles and a skeleton rises up then disappears again.

The jungle also has jaguars which can be leapt over or killed.

Weapons: Knives, whips.

Third section – Quarry/mine (caves?)

Conveyor belt to rock crusher.

Weapons: Dynamite, rocks, crowbars, oil drums.”

Page 3:

“Fourth section – Mountains.

Basically a mountain pathway with gaps that can or cannot be jumped depending on width. If too wide, climb across clinging to rock face.

Rock falls above will wobble precariously if hand grenade is thrown by hero at right time they will fall and take any villains below off path to their death. Pathway leads to iron bridge at end of level. End of bridge is temple entrance but all baddies to be cleared before door opens.

Weapons: Petrol bombs/hand grenades/rocks.

Fifth and final section – The temple.

Aztec temple with falling slabs from ceiling and moving club holding statues. Sections of floor could collapse.

Last scene: Temple proper with possibly big statue and female agent gagged and bound, preferably in state of high undress.

Lots of baddies and main villain, possibly toting gun. Could get gun off baddy but only after knocking him down three times, then spray room with bullets, general death and mayhem, victory and final scene of girl's release.”

One more design document exists that's dated 28 January 1988 and is somewhat recognisable as part of the game that was eventually released:

“Big baddy, some kind of tank like beast scrolls left to right at top of screen. Could scroll down? Firing continuously.

Destroy baddy and jeep stops, at a building or a door that opens in ground to show stairs leading down. A chopper arrives and hostages get into same and fly off. Bonus points given for each hostage. Once chopper gone, hero exits jeep, enters building or trap door and section 2 loads.”

Had the very first design been followed then it may well have looked and played more like a follow up to the original arcade game but as it wasn't to be known as the second part anymore the design veered away from the original concept the further progress went on. Any resemblance seen in the finished game, if there was any, to 'Green Beret' was just in passing.

A month or so into development and designer Simon Butler was starting to become somewhat riled. The Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC versions following the design to the tee but the ZX Spectrum version was going off on a tangent all of its own in some places for no other reason other than the programmer wanted to do certain things his own way. More of that later.

One morning I turned up for work and didn't feel like cracking on with being productive straight away so I made my way round to the newly installed second music room, near Commodore 64 programmer Colin Porch's desk was, where games tester Rocky Ming was sat and had started to try and load up some of that day's faulty games that had been delivered via Royal Mail that morning. I just so happened to have some firecrackers on me which I'd bought from a joke shop. These were inserted into people's cigarettes to give them the fright of their lives upon lighting. Rocky went to make himself a morning coffee while I took the opportunity to insert a firecracker each into two of Rocky's cigarettes as he had conveniently left them on the side unattended. Rocky returned with his drink and proceeded to reach for a smoke. Luckily for me he picked one of the tampered cigarettes and within three seconds of lighting it blew up in Rocky's face, much to the glee of myself and those sat around. The cigarette itself was destroyed with only

a third of it remaining between Rocky's lips and its burnt remnants littered the floor. I burst out laughing as Rocky jumped out his chair. Once the shock of what had just happened subsided, eventually, he saw the funny side and realised nothing really life threatening had taken place. After a few minutes and once our laughing had stopped I said that I was off to my room to start work for the day and made my way to the other side of the building, happy in the knowledge that Rocky had another surprise in store for him later in the day.

After an hour or so of sitting at my desk working I needed to ask Gary something so I made my way to his office only to find he wasn't there. I asked about "Anyone seen Gary?" No one had so I went back to my room and carried on working. After a few minutes Rocky appeared at the door. He said, "Mark, are you looking for Gary?" "Yes. Why? Do you know where he is?" I replied. "Have you not heard?" he said. "Heard what?" I replied. "Gary's had to go to hospital. He asked me if I had a spare fag so I gave him one of mine but he picked the one you'd put that other firecracker in. When it exploded something went in his eye and he's had to go A&E." I suddenly felt very sick. "God, what have I done?" I thought. I immediately went into high anxiety mode, certain that now I had gone too far and it was only a matter of time before I'd be called in to the office and sacked with immediate effect. I spent the next few hours not being able to concentrate on any of my work. I didn't even have anything to eat at dinner time as was still feeling sick to the stomach. I was certain that, by the end of the day, I would be called to the office, dismissed and shown the door. Every slam of the dungeon's front door filled me with dread as I then listened out for the sound of Gary's voice. It was a good few hours later, at around half two in the afternoon, that I heard the familiar voice of my boss as he returned to the programming department. I waited for the inevitable call to the office. And waited. And waited. Eventually, after over just an hour or so, I heard Gary making his way round to my side of the building. "Here goes!" I thought and I dared not even breathe as Gary walked straight past my door. "What?" I thought. Gary didn't appear to be in any hurry to speak to me and he sounded like he was in a good mood which surely he wouldn't have been given what had happened to his eye earlier and the trip to the hospital. After about five minutes I decided I had to find out what was going on and get it over with as I was fed up of feeling so anxious that I certain I was going to be sick. I went to the room where Gary was. He was down the far end talking to John Brandwood and Steve Wahid. I was expecting to see his eye bandaged up but both of Gary's eyes were visible and were both still pointing in the same direction. I was confused and asked Gary the question I wanted to ask him earlier in the day. He replied with no mention of having to have a word with me in his office or any hospital visit. I asked Gary where he'd been. "Oh we had a meeting upstairs; it went on too bloody long though." I heard raucous laughter coming from the corridor behind me. It was Rocky and I'd been well and truly had. Rocky had been caught out by my second firecracker but concocted the whole story about Gary getting it in the eye as his revenge. A wave of relief rushed over me and, once I'd gotten over the shock and my heart rate had, at last, returned to normal, congratulated Rocky on his well thought out revenge. I had never been so relieved in all my life.

In the March 1988 issue of '*Sinclair User*' magazine my old school friend Adrian Singh, who was the now the main man supplying the magazine with their game pokes, had his '*Poke City*' program featured on its cover tape. This was a little program that readers of the magazine could load into their computers at home. Once loading was complete they could then select the poke they wanted from a menu. A poke gave the player various cheat options like infinite lives, extra time or level selects. It would then run and the user would load the game itself in afterwards. Once loading was complete the game would run and the chosen poke would alter the program to make it easier to play. Protection systems for game's software had become more and more complicated over time in the software house's quests to make games harder to copy. Because of this the programs that were needed to get round the '*Speedlock*' and headerless hyperloads that the software companies were now employing were getting more complicated. As a type-in listing these longer programs had to be printed without a single error in order for them to work properly. Most of them consisted of seemingly endless lines of data and one error in any one of the many numbers would render the program completely unusable. Anyone who's typed in a magazine listing would remember the sheer horror of having spent an hour typing a listing in then, having thought you'd finished, you'd then RUN it only for it to report with an error message - '4 Out Of Memory' and 'E Out of DATA' were the ones I remember seeing the most. Even worse, the program could crash the computer either by freezing it, after which all you could do was turn it off and on again or reset it completely. That always seemed to happen if you'd inadvertently forgotten to save your program

to tape before trying it out. The whole program would then be lost and the only thing left to do was start all over and type it in again. If you were lucky enough not to have lost your work – or had the forethought to save it to a blank tape before trying to run it – you'd then have to try and work out why it wasn't working properly. You'd have either typed a part of it in wrong or the printout itself in the magazine contained an error. Another hour would go by as you double checked everything, comparing to the printed version in the magazine character by character, line by line. It was even worse if you then discovered that what you had typed in was exactly how it had been printed in the magazine. This meant the publisher themselves had made an error and, if you didn't have a good knowledge of Z80 machine code, it was impossible to work out where the error was and you'd have to wait a whole month for the next issue in order to see if they'd printed a correction. 'Sinclair User', by making Adrian's pokes available this way, got rid of the need for the end user to have to type the programs in themselves. You could be sure there were no errors contained within it as they'd been typed in by the author himself. Adrian would then complete his 'Poke City' programs by having a nice professional menu screen complete with a, sometimes humorous, message scrolling along the bottom. I would sometimes get a little mention from him in some of them:

Issue 72 'Poke City' from March 1988:

“HURRAH!!! To all at OCEAN especially to Mark Jones, who designed the graphics for games such as WIZBALL, and GRYZOR”

Issue 74 'Poke City' from May 1988:

“Whotcha MARK JONES me mate, I dig the fab loading screen for REVENGE OF DOH (outa this world!!)”

Issue 75 'Poke City' from June 1988:

“MARK JONES (of OCEAN), who did the arty bits on VINDICATOR has told me to tell you of the cat that lies in the middle of the road. If you like gore then run over it, and see it get splattered”

I was quite proud of that. Run over the already dead cat with your tank and it turned into even more of a squashed mess! In the scrolling message for issue 77 'Poke City' from August 1988 Adrian explains how he got into hacking computer games so I thought I'd reproduce this part of his scrolling message exactly as he wrote it. It makes for an interesting read:

“Anyone out there want to know how I started HACKING??? OKAY!! Here goes...It all began in good ol' 1985, yep. I was dead set against learning Z80 machine language, which seemed at first like utter nonsense. I examined various articles written in magazines, but many a visit to the REFERENCE section in my local library, and the aid of book by RODNEY ZAKS enabled me to learn this wretched language. I began at the bottom, tackling only those programs that were MERGEABLE. Dealt with 'FRAMES' counter protection by ULTIMATE, and then moved on to the HEADERLESS programs and the 16384, 49152 (full memory, ala MONTY MOLE) code protection. Then a HYPER-LOAD protection appeared on ULTIMATE GAMES and I tackled that. The onset of SPEEDLOCK made life much more difficult, but I had learned enough to handle this one. With newer SPEEDLOCKS and special loaders appearing I acquired a MULTIFACE ONE and the GENIE DISASSEMBLER. With this combination I have brought you many original POKES every month to this very day, and this very issue...Wot a boring life you say? Not so, I always manage to see the end screen of any game I hack so there!!!”

The book Adrian refers to was Rodney Zaks' 'Programming the Z80'. Published originally in 1979 by Sybex Computer Books.

Adrian's last message to me was written for issue 82s 'Poke City' from January 1989:

“Hi to MARK JONES (where are you? What are you doing me old mate?)”

'Poke City' then disappeared for another 10 issues. The next one wasn't published until issue 92 in November 1989 where the scrolling message, which had been written by Jon North who had now taken Adrian's place as the author of 'Poke City', announced:

"Adrian Singh has gone to Poly' to get educated"

I wasn't to hear anything from Adrian again for another twenty eight years.

Meanwhile, in the 10 May 1988 edition of 'Northampton's Business Chronicle' newspaper I was interviewed for a feature on my job at Ocean. I never did find out how, but they had heard that I was having a successful 'career' at the famous software house and had decided to interview me for a feature:

"Mixing business with pleasure...

Mark turns his hobby into a career

Computer-crazy teenager Mark Jones has turned his favourite hobby into a £10,000-a-year career.

For just four years after getting his first home computer, 17-year-old Mark works for the largest electronic games manufacturer in the UK.

Mark of Longland Road, Northampton spends his working hours designing the dazzling graphics for video games which baffle most adults but keep children amused for hours.

"I must be one of the luckiest people in the country to be paid for something I've enjoyed doing for a long time" said the former Northampton School for Boys pupil.

Mark's love-affair with computer graphics began when he was 14 and his parents bought him a Sinclair Spectrum.

Within months the talented teenager had mastered the art of producing drawings on screen and his rapid rise to success was underway.

He put together a demonstration tape of his graphics and sent it to Manchester-based Ocean - who immediately offered him a job.

He was the youngest person to have joined the Ocean design team shortly after his 16th birthday.

Now two of his games - Wizball and Gryzor - third, Vindicator goes on sale in June. (sic)

And his success has already attracted the attention of BBC presenter Keith Chegwin who is to interview Mark for a BBC programme on teenagers in highly paid jobs.

The six-month design job which results in a video game starts in planning meetings where ideas are discussed by the team.

"A couple of ideas will sound promising and after we've discussed improvements the designer produces a story board which shows all the characters and the movements he wants built in," said Mark.

"Then I have to produce the story board on the screen and we can often make still more improvements as we go along until the finished game is ready to be played."

But will his love affair with video games wear off as he gets older?

"I can't say for certain whether I'll still be doing this when I'm 40 but who knows," said Mark.

"There are older people on the staff who said they couldn't imagine doing the job five years later - but they're still with us."

"At the moment I am quite happy earning a good salary for what to me is a hobby anyway."

Also in the article was a cheesy photo of me "at the controls of his computer". It wasn't my computer at all. I had to go to the Chronicle's office in town on one of my weekends back in Northampton. I was sitting in front of some PC computer that belonged to the newspaper and was used to write articles. It's clearly not a ZX Spectrum! I also wished I'd taken my glasses off for the photo. Those spectacles with massive frames haven't aged well!

Back at Ocean, while Mike and Ronnie were close to completing the ZX Spectrum version of 'Arkanoid – Revenge of Doh', the follow up to 'Arkanoid', in the room next door, I was in work and found myself twiddling my thumbs again. Ronnie had obviously noticed this and popped into the room I was sharing with Paul and asked me if I fancied drawing the loading screen for their nearly completed game. I jumped at the chance. I still got a thrill from making loading screens and I

was bored out my head so I got started on it immediately. I grabbed a magazine that had a copy of the games advert in it and started plotting pixels. I started with the games logo first then drew the wire mesh that the logo was sat on. This was easy as I only had to draw half of it then the rest of it could be mirrored. I then drew a weedy looking spaceship. Simon Butler came by and had a look at what I was doing. He suggested I draw a border box, get rid of the crappy spaceship, draw another new one on paper first so that I had something to reference it from and have it coming out of the box on the screen towards the viewer. So I added the border, put the buildings in place and then drew a meatier looking spaceship. This was much easier to draw on the Spectrum screen than if I had just drawn it straight from my head as I knew what it was going to look like beforehand. Once completed, it looked much better than the spaceship I'd had before. Along with the addition of an Imagine logo and the games credits the screen was complete. I was rather pleased with it, though it did have a load of black space on either side so I had to do something with it. I filled it with multiple 'The Beatles' logos and covered them in black ink and black paper so they wouldn't be visible to anyone who bought the game and was just loading it up. They were there to be discovered when someone decided to start messing about with it. Then the moment of truth came when I had to show Mike and Ronnie my creation. Always a testing time in the life of a graphic artist. Happily they both loved it and the screen was put into the game ready for copying on to thousands of master tapes.

Around April/May 1988 games for the Atari ST and, to a lesser extent at first, Commodore Amiga computers had started to become more and more popular. The previous range of computers – ZX Spectrums, Commodores and Amstrads – were 8-bit machines. These next generation machines were 16-bit. The number referred to the size of the microprocessor (Central Processing Unit – CPU). The higher the bits the more efficient the CPU. Amiga's and ST's had many more colours and memory than their older 8-bit relatives and, thus, could offer more arcade quality games. They also stored data on discs which made the loading in of that date much faster than the old 8-bit tape system. The very first title Ocean developed for the Atari ST and Commodore Amiga – there were no ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC or Commodore 64 versions written or even attempted – was called 'Eco' and had been written out-of-house by Denton Designs. Other early Ocean 16-bit titles like '*Army Moves*', '*Slap Fight*', '*Platoon*' and '*Wizball*' – most of which, excepting Peter Johnson's '*Wizball*' conversions – were pretty crummy. These had all been developed out-of-house and it would be a few more months before in-house development of 16-bit titles started – much to the annoyance of some of the staff who were itching to be let loose on the more advanced machines. For a while now we'd had loads of Atari ST's in the building but most of them were linked up to monochrome monitors as they were used by the programmers to code 8-bit titles on and, as such, wouldn't run any Atari ST games as they required a colour monitor or connection to a television to work. The games just would not run otherwise. As Atari ST's grew in popularity and Ocean themselves were developing more and more games for the machine it wasn't long before we had an Atari ST computer available to us that we were able to use to load up some games on. We had to be careful though as being caught by Gary or Lorraine messing around with other people's games while at work would result in a verbal dressing down in the office. Simon Butler would bring in the odd Atari ST game for us all to look at and we'd have a quick go either in our dinner hour or last thing at night just as everyone was starting to go home at around half past five.

One of the first really good Atari ST titles to be released was '*Typhoon Thompson in Search for the Sea Child*' which was written by Dan Gorlin and released by Broderbund/Domark. Simon had got hold of an original copy and brought it into work. He loaded the game up and told me specifically to watch the demo carefully as it had some tiny graphics which were exquisitely animated. In the introduction sequence a UFO hovers above the sea, the main character pops out and looks to see what's in store for him. He dashes back inside the UFO only to be dragged back out by his superior, who then bashes him on the head and throws him into the game. Typhoon Thompson then makes his way towards the Spirit Guardians who bestow upon him the powers that will be needed to complete his quest. We were all pretty impressed and marveled at how many frames must have been drawn in order to produce all the fluid animation we were seeing. It was pretty original too; we'd never seen a similar type of game on any machine before. Online research gives varying release dates of 1988 and 1989 for '*Typhoon Thompson*' but I definitely recall seeing it earlier than that and a look at the actual games inlay gives a copyright date of 1987. Ultimately, the experience of looking at these games on the latest machines was a bit depressing as we were

all still working on 8-bit titles at Ocean with our four frames of walking animation and limited colour palettes. To us it looked like, if we were making a game on the Atari ST, the only restriction would be our own imagination. *'Typhoon Thompson'* gave us a good example of what could now be done if we were ever given the chance. (https://youtu.be/tPj_AmKCrLg)

Simon then showed me a French game by Exxos called *'Captain Blood'* written by Didier Bouchon and Phillippe Ulrich. We were both amazed at the bizarre, sampled Jean-Michel Jarre music and then, again, at the graphics. The multi coloured, psychedelic hyper spacing left us open mouthed as did the super-fast skimming over the planet surface section that looked like something you'd have seen aboard the Nostromo ship from the film *'Alien'*. When the ship landed the landscape would then fill in with solid colours and you would attempt to communicate with an alien that was trying to talk to you in his weird alien language. We didn't really have a clue as to what we were actually supposed to be doing in *'Captain Blood'* but that didn't really matter. It looked and sounded bloody amazing. (<https://youtu.be/XKyK4RFa0PU>)

The third game literally blew everything we had ever seen before away in one fell swoop. Not only did it look great, but it was also one of those games that sucked you in to its environment and before you knew it you were trying to play it whenever you had any spare time, even if it was just for five minutes. That game was called *'Dungeon Master'*, written by FTL Games and released on 15 December 1987. FTL (Faster Than Light) were a company from the US though had nothing to do with the UK FTL that had released ZX Spectrum titles like *'Light Force'*, *'Shockway Rider'* and *'Hydrofool'* a few years previously. *'Dungeon Master'* showed that role playing type games no longer had to use stick man graphics and, usually, be written in BASIC, as was usually the case with their 8-bit counterparts. The moment you clicked on the 'Enter' button that opened the door to the first cavern you immediately became immersed in its world. The first task involved assembling the four members of your party that you would use in your game. Then, the game guided the player in gently with simple puzzles and easy monsters to avoid or try and kill during the early levels as you traveled deeper and deeper into the dungeons. The more you progressed the slightly more difficult the game became. You always wanted to get just that bit further to see what else the game was going to throw at you. *'Dungeon Master'* reportedly sold 40,000 copies in its first year of release alone and went on to become the bestselling Atari ST game of all time. I thought it was brilliant but could only grab a chance to play it if I stayed in during lunch or hung about at work after home time and would get a half hour or so then as I didn't have an Atari ST at home to play it on. I bought the May 1988 issues of *'ST Action'* and *'ST Update'* magazines just so I could read more about the game as both had reviewed *'Dungeon Master'* in their pages. The magazines had reviewed it favourably (<https://youtu.be/FiEgnbqeU0k>). The latter mag stated:

"The best graphics, the most animation in an RPG game combine to provide you with a killer piece of software which will have dungeon delvers everywhere polishing their broad swords in eager anticipation."

Commodore Amiga users had a long wait of over a year before a conversion of the game was released on their machine. I had tasted the delights of the world of 16-bit software and glimpsed the next generation but the thought of having to make a game on them filled me with dread. What if I couldn't draw 16-bit graphics?

On Friday 24 June a memo was issued to everyone at Ocean about a forthcoming work party that was due to occur. There was no real reason for it other than to act as a team building exercise, to boost to staff morale and celebrate all the success we were having. It read:

"MEMO

To: All Staff

Re: Jacobean Banquet – Thursday, 30th June 1988

We will be collected outside our offices at 6:30p.m. by coach to take us to Worsley Old Hall to arrive approximately 7.00p.m.

The Banquet will begin at 7.45p.m. through to 10.30p.m. There will be dancing to finish off the evening until 12.00 Midnight when the coach will collect us from Worsley Old Hall and bring us back to Central Street.

Dress – Smart casual wear (no jeans).

Hope you have a lovely evening.

Miss. D. Ellis”

The day of the party soon arrived. I'd never been to a '*Jacobean Banquet*' before so didn't really know what to expect. Worsley Old Hall is a former house that had been converted into a public house and restaurant. The building dates from the 16th or early 17th century and was then remodeled in the 18th century. It certainly looked impressive from the outside with its black and white timbered walls and huge chimney stacks. Once inside we were ushered to our seats which were benches situated next to long wooden tables. It looked like one of those old medieval banquets I'd seen in films and I half expected whole pigs with apples in their mouths to be brought out by the serving wenches. The evening went well with everyone getting drunk on the mead and other beverages that were being served by people dressed in 17th century clothing to add to the atmosphere. As Ocean was footing the bill for the evening everyone indulged to excess and the night got messier the longer it went on. I'm sure it'll come as no surprise to you that the night soon resulted in much drunkenness, food fights with whole chunks of meat and bread rolls flying through the air, across tables and making a huge mess as they landed and broke up into pieces. The toilets were soon in a right state as the mixture of overeating and drinking resulted in many rainbow yawns that splattered on to the porcelain sinks and toilet bowls. We all thought it was hilarious but I dread to think what the staff who had to clear up afterwards thought of us. Barely anyone turned up for work on time the next day and the majority of the day was spent with everyone holding their heads in their hands as we all recovered from the inevitable hangovers. When everyone was paid around midday we walked to one of the pubs near Central Street for some hair of the dog. I don't think anything even mildly constructive was achieved in work that day.

On Friday 8 July 1988, while still working on '*The Vindicator*', television presenter and all round chuckle-meister Keith Chegwin came down to Ocean to film an insert for a new children's television programme he was making. I'd seen Keith in person twice before. Once back in the 1977 when '*Swap Shop*' chose the playground in Abington Park as the location for that days '*Swaparama*' and, the second time, when me and Leanne had gone up to Weston Favell Shopping Centre for the outside broadcast segments for the first edition of '*Saturday Superstore*' in 1982. Keith's new television series was going to be called '*Chegwin Checks It Out*' which, in the end, only ran for one series. In this episode he was looking at young people who were earning vast amounts of money. Initially I was a bit puzzled as to why he wanted to talk to me. I was only earning around £110 a week after tax! It was barely enough to live on. Hardly any actual work was done that day with at least half of the staff spending their time standing around chatting and occasionally poking their noses round the corners to see what Keith and his chums were up to. With great forethought Paul Owens had brought in his video camera and recorded most of the proceedings which now form the most complete record of what downstairs at Ocean looked and sounded like at the time. Unfortunately, no behind the scenes shots exist of my interview as that was filmed in the small room I worked in with Paul Owens and once Keith, his camera crew and sound men were in there was barely any room to stroke a cat let alone swing one. My interview, much to my relief, was filmed from behind the closed door. One reason this was done was so that work mates weren't tempted to try and disrupt proceedings by trying to make me laugh or by making fart noises during filming. I was actually very nervous about the interview and had worried about how embarrassing it would be to be filmed talking to Keith with everyone gawping at me so I was somewhat relieved when I was told by a member of the crew that it would be recorded in relative privacy.

Once my interview was in the can Keith went round the other side of the building and had a nose in '*Arcade Alley*' where he had a couple of goes on the '*Operation Wolf*' machine that was set up in there. Then he and his crew set up in one of the bigger rooms in order to film Keith asking the questions he'd just put to me. The room he'd actually interviewed me in was too small to do it in so when you see the finished clip Keith and I are in completely different rooms even though it looks like we are having a conversation face to face. I wasn't even sitting in front of him when he asked them. No one was. Here Keith was sat where Andrew Deakin usually worked and you can see an early version of the ZX Spectrum '*Rambo III*' running on the monitor. Next, an interview with

another Ocean staffer who was a few months younger than me, David Blake, was filmed. David had been taken on a few months previously as a trainee Commodore 64 programmer under the watchful eye of David Collier. David's answers to Keith's questions were so quiet though I think this might have had something to do with the fact that his interview ultimately went unused in the finished program. After this they all then moved to Jonathan Dunn's room where Keith spent some time playing on Jon's Roland D-50 keyboard which was state of the art at the time having only been released the previous year (at a retail price of £1,445). We were all surprised to hear that Keith was quite good at playing the keyboard as he competently demonstrated a couple of compositions. Here they filmed Jon Dunn playing along to the Commodore 64 tune that he'd just written for *'Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge'*. This was followed by another shot of Keith and Jon miming to the *'Chegwin Checks it Out'* theme tune, again, on the Roland D-50 keyboard. The former clip went unused but the latter was used as part of the introduction to each episode in the series. Finally the crew set up in Gary Bracey's office where a third interview was filmed with him. Again, this went unused but you can see and hear it all, more or less, in the behind the scenes footage which is available on YouTube (for all the links see the section at the end).

When the clip was eventually broadcast on Tuesday 4 October 1988 at 16:35 on BBC 1 a group of staffers all gathered to watch it around a television that had been set up in the desk area outside 'Arcade Alley'. A VHS player was connected and the segment was recorded on to a blank tape. The insert starts off with some establishing shots of the less shy people employed pretending to work for the cameras which is then followed by the uncomfortable interview with yours truly. I can be seen pretending to work on *'The Vindicator'* through the sort of glasses Deirdre from *'Coronation Street'* would have been proud of along with a seriously gelled side-parting haircut and evidence of the teenage acne I was still suffering from. As everyone watched it I was hiding around the corner behind a permanently shut door (it had no handle) listening to the show and cringing at the sound of my own voice. I couldn't bear to watch it with everyone else. Once it had finished I went back around and asked, "Did I look like a knob then?" to which everyone laughed. I could only watch it myself later on while sat on my own. A close up shot of my hands typing away made me think to myself that I hoped no one had noticed that I still bit my fingernails. My Mum recorded it for me onto VHS tape but, unfortunately, missed the beginning of the show. So while my interview is available to watch on YouTube the clip of Jon and Keith playing together in his music room hasn't surfaced so I've not seen it since 1988 but most probably still survives in the BBC archive somewhere. Everything I had on tape of this edition of *'Chegwin Checks It Out'* can be seen here: https://youtu.be/J_v784WnAE4. The Ocean related material starts at 14:16.

At Ocean all staff were able, should they choose, to work overtime at the weekends at the offices. We were paid for this at a higher rate than the normal Monday to Friday pay so, because of this, there was usually at least a couple of staff in the building on those days. As I went home for Saturday and Sunday I never worked at the weekend, except once. That weekend I decided to stay in Manchester and went into work for both days. It was pointless staying in the flat as there wasn't much to do so thought I might as well go in to work. At least there I'd have people to talk to. Having been at work an hour I soon realised that the place was even more out of control than it was in the week due to the fact there were no organ grinders to keep an eye on the monkeys! I did barely any work those two days and the time was spent messing around, sitting on desks chatting and being silly. This particular weekend 'work' culminated in a shot gunning session with cans of lager in Gary's office by some of the slightly older members of staff. I can, with hand on heart, assure you I was not involved in what occurred – I didn't even like the taste of lager. My participation consisted of watching and laughing at what was going on and, most probably, egging on the shot gunners! For those that don't know, shot gunning cans of drink is a means of consuming said liquid very quickly by punching a hole in the side of a can, near the bottom, putting your mouth over the hole, and pulling the tab to open the top. The liquid drains out at speed and, if done properly, is quickly consumed. The thing is, quite a few times it wasn't done properly and a few of the can's contents ended up all over the carpet, walls and ceiling of Mr. Bracey's office! The ceiling down in the Central Street cellars was very high so it was impossible to reach in order to clean off the sprayed beverages. You'd have needed a long ladder to reach it. We all found it hilarious as everyone involved made more and more mess and, those who were doing shot gunning properly, got more and more drunk. That was until Monday morning when Gary and Lorraine arrived at work to an office that smelt like a brewery and whose walls and carpets were spattered with lines of now dried, brown, sticky lager. The shit hit the fan and, one by one,

everyone who'd been working that weekend was called in to the office for an interrogation and, once it was discerned who had been responsible for the mess, a severe bollocking. No one lost their job but the possibility, for a few hours at least, had been there. I still made sure I filled in my overtime form though and was duly paid the going rate.

Now most of the in-game graphics for *'The Vindicator'* were more or less complete it was time to make the loading screen for the game. I started off by drawing the logo from Bob's artwork, leaving out the *'Green Beret II'* tag as that had been junked long ago. I think by now though I'd got a bit sick of the project. Because *'The Vindicator'* was going to consist of three different types of games in one package the whole thing just seemed to be taking forever and an age. It was certainly taking a lot longer to make than *'Wizball'* or *'Gryzor'* had. My attitude towards it showed in the loading screen as I made no attempt to include all the features of the game's artwork and just drew the main character standing on a barren landscape and holding his huge, smoking machine gun. It was a good job really that I hadn't included lots of intricate detail in the screen as, when I was telling myself it was just about finished, a memo reached my desk asking me to add some text to the screen:

"Tuesday, 5th July 1988

MEMO

To: All Programmers

From: Gary Bracey

Please note on all games listed below, the following message must appear on the loading screen of each format.

"COME AND SEE US AT THIS YEAR'S PCW SHOW 88 – 14th to 18th SEPTEMBER, EARLS COURT, LONDON – STAND 3101"

Please ensure that there is a version of the loading screen without this text on in case we have future use for it in compilations.

ALL FORMATS:

- 1. Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge*
- 2. Typhoon*
- 3. Vindicator*

If you have any questions about the above, please ask me.

Regards,

Gary"

It looks like the memo didn't reach Steve Lamb who was coding the ZX Spectrum conversion of *'Typhoon'* on an out-of-house basis. The loading screen for that game doesn't have any mention of the computer show. Luckily, on *'The Vindicator'* loading screen I had that barren landscape sitting there doing nothing much so I added the required text over the top of it. I would have kept a version of the screen without the text as we were asked in the memo but whatever Microdrive it was on was lost over time so it doesn't exist anymore. *'The Vindicator'* was later re-released on Ocean's budget Hit Squad label in 1990. That would have been the ideal opportunity to remaster it with the original, unfettered, loading screen but it wasn't so it bears the same message - asking you to visit us at a show that had taken place two years ago!

I was to receive another cameo appearance in the Commodore 64 version of *'Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge'* (my other being *'Target: Renegade'* a few months back). Again, John Palmer had been producing the graphics for the game and had drawn a poster of me that was placed on the wall in the sit-ups section of the game showing me in a pair of shorts, looking very weedy and sporting a huge pair of glasses (which wasn't that far off reality!) Even though the depiction of me wasn't very flattering (again) I was secretly chuffed it had been put in the finished game.

I took a two week break right near the end of *'The Vindicator'*, thinking all the graphics needed had been completed. Conrad and I booked into a hotel in Torquay for five days or so where my nose got so sun burnt it was leaking clear pus. It was so sore. I remember being in a toilet and

pressing tissue paper on to it to soak up the liquid but I applied too much pressure, my hand slipped and a perfectly round section of thick skin detached itself from my nose leaving a horrible, raw, red patch which I then had to try and hide by wearing a cap for the duration of our stay. It looked like I'd been beaten up! While I was on holiday Paul, the programmer of *'The Vindicator'*, had decided he wanted some more graphics producing so asked another Spectrum artist to draw a status panel for the vertical shoot 'em up section of the game. When I got back to work the next week and saw this I wasn't too pleased. I had worked on the game for the last few months and felt a bit put out that Paul hadn't waited for me to come back as I would have drawn the status panel myself and differently. I didn't really want anyone else's graphics in my game. I'd like to add that I wouldn't think like that now but back then the ZX Spectrum version of the game was my project and was going out with my name on it. For years I've been certain this other artist was Bill Harbison. I remember coming back after my holiday and him showing it to me and I'd been moved seats, right next to Bill outside 'Arcade Alley'. I'm still 99.9% certain it was him that drew it, but Bill has told me that the status panel isn't his.

Once *'The Vindicator'* was finished the reviews started to appear in magazines. The game was nothing really earth shattering so it only received some okay-ish write ups. Scores awarded varied from 80% in *'Crash'* (issue 57, October 1988, page 20), 8/10 in *'Your Sinclair'* (issue 35, November 1988, page 34) and a crappy 62% in *'Sinclair User'* (issue 79, October 1988, page 53). I wouldn't have gone out and bought anyone else's game that had only garnered 62% so didn't really expect many Spectrum owners to either. The game just didn't really work out how we all wanted it to originally. The maze section was too boring, the shoot em' up section too simple and the last platform section was the worst of the lot. Hey ho! These things happen! Too many changes had been made as we went along and it had lost something.

After having completed *'The Vindicator'* Paul wasn't available to start on any new games. He was now busy mastering Ocean's first big compilation for the ZX Spectrum called *'The Magnificent 7'* which contained a lot of Ocean's recent hits. Looking at it now, it was a really nice package and included *'Head Over Heels'*, *'Cobra'*, *'Short Circuit'*, *'Frankie Goes to Hollywood'*, *'Arkanoid'*, *'The Great Escape'*, *'Yie Ar Kung Fu'* and my *'Wizball'*. Most of the work involved Paul having to convert the games to load into a Spectrum +3 from floppy disc instead of tape, something that had not been done with those titles before. The compilation itself got a glowing write up in issue 48 of *'Crash'*, from Christmas 1987, in a feature on *'Christmas Collections'* (page 34). It also marked the first time any of my own work had been featured on a compilation as it featured *'Arkanoid'* and *'Wizball'*. I only realised years later that if you'd bought the compilation on the ZX Spectrum +3 disc format you didn't get any of the loading screens that had been produced for each game. I presume this had been done to save space so that all the games could fit onto one disc. Had the loading screens been included then that would have necessitated the use of two discs thus upping the package's production costs. I thought this was a shame as a game's loading screen was part of the whole package. I was also dismayed to find out that the version of *'Wizball'* on the disc was the boring old 48k version so even though the machine running it had the capability to play the extra 128k music and sound effects they weren't on the disc in the first place. As Paul was beavering away on that I was rattling around the place with sweet Fanny Adams to do.

It was around this time that I had a brush with another television and film personality. I was in town during my lunch break and made a visit to the Royal Exchange Theatre, for what reason I know not, located in Manchester City Centre. As I was walking up the stairs a man came rushing out and bumped into me and apologised. It was Kenneth Cranham who I had watched a few years earlier in the *'Shine on Harvey Moon'* television series that had been broadcast on ITV between 1982 and 1985. In it he played the lead character, Harvey Moon. Kenneth was currently rehearsing for a presentation for *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'* which was to be staged at 1988 Edinburgh Festival between 15 August – 3 September. I recognised him straight away but had no idea that, at the time of our collision, he had just finished filming the sequel to my favourite film *'Hellraiser'*, called *'Hellbound: Hellraiser II'*, where he played Doctor Philip Channard, the main antagonist. Channard was a psychiatrist who ran the Channard Institute where patient Kirsty Cotton (one of main characters from the first film) tells him about the Cenobites. Doctor Channard is eventually turned into a Cenobite himself and ends up killing all the Cenobites from the first film. Had I known this at the time I probably would have asked him for his autograph but as the film wasn't released in the UK until 16 June 1989 I hadn't seen it yet.

Sometime in August I was told by the powers that be, "This afternoon Mark you are going to the cinema to see *'Rambo III'*". Ocean had bought the license to the film and work was about to commence in-house on the various home computer versions. I was in for a bit of a shock though as I was going to work on the graphics for the Atari ST and Commodore Amiga versions of the game. It was slightly daunting as this would be my first foray into the world of 16-bit graphics with hundreds of colours at my disposal. I needed to see the Sylvester Stallone film first though to give me an idea of what I was going to do. I have no recollection as to why I didn't go to the cinema with everyone else who was working on the title. Maybe they went when I was down in Torquay with Conrad. I went to the Odeon on Manchester's Oxford Road, feeling 'jammy' that I was being paid to go to the cinema, and promptly fell asleep halfway through the film. I was watching it during that 2-3pm period where, if you sit down too long, your body thinks you are having a rest thus thinks it's time for a sleep. It also doesn't say much for the film itself. I was the only person in the cinema that afternoon so Ocean must have rented it for a special showing just for me!

On a trip back home to Northampton on the weekend of Saturday 10 September 1988 the weather was exceedingly hot and me, Conrad and Mark Edwards were doing our usual driving about going nowhere in particular when Conrad reminded us both that mega-star Michael Jackson was playing a big concert at the Milton Keynes Bowl that day. We were bored shitless and had nothing better to and seeing as Milton Keynes was only a short drive from Northampton we agreed it might be a bit of a laugh, even if we didn't end up actually getting in. Neither me nor Mark were really fans of 'Wacko Jacko' but could appreciate that it'd probably be better than what we were currently up to. So we made our way over there in Conrad's car. The windows were down the entire journey and the cool air streamed in as, by now, the sun was blisteringly hot. Once there we parked up and made our way up to the concert gates. Conrad was the king of the blag so he volunteered to talk to one of the security guards who was collecting the tickets on one of the gates into the bowl itself to see if there was any way we could get in. All we had to do was get past him and we could disappear into the crowd of approximately 60,000 people who were there to see Michael perform. It didn't take Conrad long to sweet talk the man on the door who quickly agreed that if we backhanded him twenty quid each he would let us through the gate. So the money was collected, slyly given to the dodgy security fella who put it straight in his back pocket and in we went.

I had never been to anything like this before and must admit I wondered what it would be like seeing someone as famous as Michael Jackson in person, albeit a few thousand feet away. He was at the height of his fame and this concert was part of his *'Bad'* tour. It followed the hugely successful album of the same name that had been released on the 31 August the previous year and peaked at number one in thirteen countries, charting within the top twenty in other territories. We spent hours standing around in the sweltering heat before the main attraction though there was a support act to watch, that relived the boredom momentarily – Kim Wilde. Along with the stifling heat and the huge amount of people there it made it virtually impossible to move from where we were to go and get a drink or use the toilet. I'd never been so uncomfortable in all my life. Mark and I though had at least walked into the bowl with a bottle of juice each but Conrad had come with nothing. Just as it started to get dark and minutes after Michael Jackson came on stage Conrad promptly fainted. He full-on dropped to the floor. Conrad collapsing had nothing to do with actually seeing 'Wacko Jacko' on stage but more due to the fact that he hadn't had anything to drink all afternoon. We were all now sweating so much we wouldn't have been any wetter had we jumped fully clothed into a lake! So the hours we'd spent standing in our spot, which had given us a semi decent view of the stage, was now wasted as me and Mark had to pull Conrad up off the floor, put one of his arms round each of our shoulders and try and get through the crowd to find the nearest First Aid point so that he could be seen to. We weren't even at this time sure what had actually happened to him. For all we knew he was about to die or had had a heart attack! As dutiful friends we made sure he got seen to by a member of staff, though it was still a struggle to move anywhere as everyone was so tightly packed together. Conrad was rehydrated by a First Aider, me and Mark called him a wuss for fainting like a pussy and another standing spot then had to be found for us to watch the concert from, which was now a few numbers in. More struggling ensued as we squeezed past the crowds and many "Excuse me's" later we then reached as close to the stage as we could manage. We didn't get quite as a good spot as before but we did alright. The concert itself was fun. At least Jacko did a few songs I knew and the atmosphere was great.

Down in London at Earl's Court the *'11th Personal Computer Show'* was set to take place from

Wednesday 14 – Sunday 18 September 1988 and, once again, myself and whole load of Ocean staff attended. Ocean had another impressive and huge presence at the show, stand 3101 to be precise, which was set to impress on show goers just how big of a company they now were. Forthcoming and just released titles that were promoted included 'Robocop' (for which Rocky Ming had been roped in/bribed to wear a 'Robocop' costume and walk around handing out freebies and posing for photos), 'Rambo III', 'Operation Wolf' (Ocean had rented a real tank to promote the title and set it up surrounded by pretend rocks and grass for full effect), 'The Untouchables' license had just been acquired (though programming had barely begun so there wasn't any game in evidence for show goers to see), 'The Vindicator', 'Guerilla War', 'Victory Road', 'Typhoon' and their new compilation 'Taito Coin-Op Hits' which was a collection that included 'Rastan', Firebird's 'Flying Shark' and 'Bubble Bobble', Imagine's own 'Arkanoid – Revenge of Doh', 'Slap Fight', 'Arkanoid', 'Legend of Kage' and 'Renegade', all on two cassette tapes for the three most popular 8-bit machines. A free A5 glossy thirty page software catalogue was produced for the show and given out in its thousands. The booklet was divided up into two halves, the first being devoted to Ocean titles and, the second half, games going out under the Imagine label. The introduction to the Ocean section read:

“Ocean brings your computer to life with an outstanding array of arcade action, adventures and excellent original-concept games.

Covering the most popular home micros including the latest 16 bit machines.

Ocean is fully committed to producing only products of the highest quality using the most advanced programming techniques and support systems.

Pioneers in character merchandising and game licensing Ocean leads the field bringing your favourite stars to life in this exciting and innovative new interactive-media.

*The
Brand Name
in
Entertainment Software”*

The Imagine half was introduced by the following:

“The name of the game is Imagine – the No.1 arcade label. Licensing only the best and most popular titles, Imagine produces chart topping hits with superlative conversions for your home micro.

Slick programming and advanced graphics techniques bring the excitement of the arcades bursting through the screen of your computer. All the fun, all the thrills and spills of the coin-op blockbusters... now at your fingertips.”

The booklet showcased all the latest titles including, as well as those already mentioned, 'Match Day II', 'Platoon', 'Gryzor', 'Combat School', 'Where Time Stood Still', 'Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge', 'Gutz', 'Firefly', 'Target: Renegade', 'Salamander' and the five compilations 'We Are the Champions', 'Live Ammo', 'Game, Set and Match', 'Magnificent Seven' and 'Konami Arcade Collection'. Ocean had some pretty good product that was already out in the shops and coming up. All was looking good.

I myself now have little memory of the show. I know I went as I still have the trade pass I was issued and wouldn't have turned down the free, paid for by work, trip down to London for the

day. Thing is, this year I didn't, for some reason, take a camera with me so I don't have any photos to act as visual reminders of what I actually did and who I went with. A few photos do exist though, those that were taken by others and some that were printed in a couple of the computer magazines at the time.

My memory is also hazy when it comes to recalling working on *'Rambo III'*. John Brandwood was programming the game and it was his first in-house 16-bit title having previously been responsible for the film conversion of *'Short Circuit'*, which I saw John working on during my interview at Ocean, and the sterling conversions of *'Renegade'* and *'Gryzor'*, all on the Amstrad CPC. John had also written an amazing Atari ST sprite and map editor for exclusive use by the Ocean artists called *'Fudd-Ed'* - named after John's nick name of 'Elmer Fudd', the Warner Bros. Looney Tunes cartoon character. I was asked to work on the 3D tank sequence for *'Rambo III'*. I had, by now, moved desks and was situated in a room right at the back of Ocean's dungeons next to Jonathan Dunn's music room. Being my first 16-bit title not only did I now have to get the shape of the sprites and background graphics right, all the colouring had to look right too - something I didn't have to bother too much with on the ZX Spectrum. Each graphic took five times as long to draw and animate as they had before. I didn't really enjoy drawing the same soldier, bullet, tanks, planes and explosions over and over again, each time slightly bigger than the last. It was a bit of a slog but I don't think I did too badly seeing as it was my first experience on the next generation of machines. I was also still learning how to use the new Ocean Atari ST sprite editor, which made the time it took to draw things a bit longer than if I was more au fait with it. I didn't really enjoy working on the game and *'Rambo III'* was released for the usual three 8-bits, the Atari ST and, quite a few months after, the Commodore Amiga. All to little fanfare.

For my next work project another arcade conversion followed, *'Dragon Ninja'* by Data East. This hadn't been out in the arcades long, having been released in April 1988. Happily I found myself back on the ZX Spectrum again. *'Dragon Ninja'* though was never really a great arcade game in the first place and I just didn't have any interest in the majority of fighting games. The format just didn't interest me. Surely it's all potluck as to whether you hit your opponent more times than they manage to hit you? I can't see that there's much skill involved in playing most fighting games. Bill Harbison had already been working on the graphics for the conversion while I was working on *'Rambo III'* so I was drafted in mid-project to help hurry things along. I was asked to design background graphics for four of the seven levels in the game. A different Spectrum artist did the other three and Bill took care of all the character sprites and animations. To be honest, it wasn't much fun to work on. The play area for the ZX Spectrum version was monochrome to avoid any colour clash, there was no colour to actually play with, so it all ended up looking a bit bland. I also still wasn't used to having to share the graphics with someone else. It was always blindingly obvious to me which graphics I'd drawn as we all had slightly different styles to each other. In my mind, they didn't match. Even now I can tell straight away which levels I drew just by seeing them. I dare say no one can see the difference between our different levels but, to clarify, here's who drew which levels:

- Level 1: **Street** – Another artist
- Level 2: **Lorry** – Mark
- Level 3: **Sewers** – Another artist
- Level 4: **Forest** – Mark
- Level 5: **Caves** – Mark
- Level 6: **Train** – Mark
- Level 7: **Warehouse and end Helicopter** – Another artist

Again, I was sure Bill Harbison did the other maps but he says they aren't his and he only did the sprites. I was not aware, then or now, that a third artist worked on *'Dragon Ninja'*. I'm sure I would have remembered had that been the case. There's only the two of us credited for graphics on the various Spectrum websites for the title. I can't think of who the other person could have been.

Maybe to wreak some sort of revenge on Paul back for getting someone else to do some of *'The Vindicator'* graphics while I was away on holiday I wrote on the side of a train graphic for *'Dragon Ninja'* the letters 'BTF', which meant 'Bugged To Fuck'. Us artists would point at it and titter away amongst ourselves knowing that Paul, at that time, didn't realise what the letters referred to until we told him many years later. It says much about the project that when I finally met up with

Paul again nearly thirty years after the fact he had no recollection whatsoever of coding the game. He was sure it wasn't one of his. It was! As per usual when all the game graphics were complete it was time to get a loading screen drawn for the game. Bill didn't fancy doing it himself, he still had animations to finish off, and so I took on the task and spent a couple of days working on it. As the game was only one player on the ZX Spectrum compared to the two player co-operative on the arcade version I made the decision to only draw one of the two 'ninjas' that were shown on the game artwork. Plus by doing so it also meant half the work! It took a few days to draw, four at the most. The screen was completed on Wednesday 9 November 1988 at twenty five past two in the afternoon. How can I be this precise you ask? If you remove the colour attributes from the screen itself I have left a hidden message saying so. The ZX Spectrum conversion itself hasn't aged well at all with its simplistic game play and monochromatic graphics. I also was annoyed that Paul had credited himself on the in-game menu but no one else. Four people worked on the game, me and Bill on the graphics and Jonathan Dunn produced the 48k and 128k music so why did Paul only credit himself? I didn't think that was very fair. Matters weren't helped when I eventually saw the credits on the printed inlay for the game itself. Everyone had got a mention except me. Instructions had to be checked and given the okay by the programmer. Had Paul already forgotten that I had drawn the graphics for over half the levels less than five minutes after me finishing them? I didn't really think so. I'm sure now Paul didn't leave me off on purpose or because he was being spiteful. He'd worked on so many games that I guess that, for him, the novelty had worn off from having his name credited on an inlay. It hadn't for me so to have worked on a game and not got a mention on the inlay pissed me off somewhat. Luckily I had signed my loading screen so at least I had a mention somewhere in the package.

Out of all the ZX Spectrum games I had worked on '*Dragon Ninja*' was the title I looked at and played again the least in the following years. I just found it so boring to play and to look at. The game earned a measly 46% in its review in '*Crash*' (issue 62, March 1989) though '*Sinclair User*' gave it a respectable 82% when it was re-issued on Ocean's budget label The Hit Squad for £2.99 a year or so later. After this I then had to spend the following six weeks leading up to Christmas going to work with no actual work to do. It was mind numbingly boring. Each day would drag and I would just be huffing and puffing about trying to find something to occupy my mind. Everyone at Ocean then had a week or so off for the Christmas break and I was relieved to be back home again in Northampton.

ZX Spectrum games I worked on in 1988:

(Title, label, retail price, '*Crash*' issue number & date - overall score gained)

1. '**Arkanoid – Revenge of Doh**' by Imagine, £7.95, issue 51, April 1988 – 80% – Loading screen.
2. '**The Vindicator**' by Imagine, £7.95, issue 57, October 1988 – 80% – All in-game graphics (bar a status panel in the shoot 'em up section) and loading screen.
3. '**Dragon Ninja**' by Imagine, £7.95, issue 62, March 1989 – 46% – Background graphics for four levels and loading screen.

Atari ST & Amiga games I worked on in 1988:

(Title, label & retail price)

1. '**Rambo III**' by Ocean, £19.95 – Graphics for the 3-D tank section.

ZX Spectrum software bought in 1988:

(Title, label, price paid, date of purchase (if known), '*Crash*' issue number & date - overall score gained)

1. '**Bosconian '87**' by Mastertronic, £1.99, no *Crash* review.
2. '**Garfield – Big, Fat, Hairy Deal**' by The Edge, £8.99, issue 50, March 1988 – *Crash Smash* 90%.
3. '**Cybernoid**' by Hewson Consultants, £7.99, issue 51, April 1988 – *Crash Smash* 96%.

4. **'Soldier of Fortune'** by Firebird, £7.95, issue 57, October 1988 – 70%.
5. **'Gnome Ranger'** by Level 9, £9.95, no *Crash* review.
6. **'Ultimate Play the Game: The Collected Works'** by Ultimate/U.S.Gold, £12.99, issue 56, September 1988 – *Crash Smash* 97%.
7. **'Rex'** by Martech, £8.99, issue 59, December 1988 – 82%

Full price releases = **6**
 Budget releases = **1**
 Total purchased = **7**
 Total spent = **£58.85**

A poor show for purchased games, with only six freshly written games being purchased this year. *'Cybernoid'* looked pretty and had some neat 128k music but it proved just too hard for me and I soon forgot about it, though lots of other people appeared to like it.

My penultimate ZX Spectrum purchase was one of the best compilations ever released for the computer. It was so good I could not resist getting myself copy. *'Ultimate: The Collected Works'* collected together all those magical Ultimate Play the Game titles, bar one, that I had loved as a schoolboy. The missing game was *'Underwulde'*. It missed being included for no other reason than the user would have to put their computer in to 48k mode before loading it up. Had anyone loaded it in using the 128k tape loader then the game would crash once loading was complete due to coding incompatibility. The publisher, which was now actually U.S.Gold as they now owned the rights to the Ultimate name and back catalogue, didn't think to include *'Underwulde'* and inform the user via the instructions that this was what they had to do to run the game successfully. The game was just completely left out instead which I thought was a bit silly as it made the whole package feel incomplete.

I topped off my ZX Spectrum purchases with *'Rex'*. It had nice, well animated graphics and some cool 128k sound effects included. I thought it was a fantastic game though very hard to really get anywhere in it. If anything, I think *'Crash'* magazine underrated it. I'm still of the opinion that *'Rex'* deserved a *Crash Smash* award and a higher overall percentage. With this I had bought my last ever new ZX Spectrum release.

While I did amass a huge collection of pirated games throughout my ZX Spectrum years I think I did okay and redeemed myself somewhat with the amount of games I did actually buy with real money from real shops. Let's sum up my ZX Spectrum games buying career:

| | |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1984 – 9 titles at a total cost of = | £33.35 |
| 1985 – 35 titles at a total cost of = | £157.59 |
| 1986 – 68 titles at a total cost of = | £476.54 |
| 1987 – 34 titles at a total cost of = | £226.38 |
| 1988 – 7 titles at a total cost of = | £58.85 |

Over the course of the period I was a ZX Spectrum software buyer I had personally spent a grand total of **£952.71** on **153** new titles. That's the equivalent of around **£2,722.07** at time of writing (2022).

THOSE WE LOST IN 1988:

Heather O'Rourke – 1 February.
Andy Gibb – 10 March.
Kenneth Williams – 15 April.
Russell Harty – 8 June.
Nico – 18 July.
Roy Kinnear – 20 September.
Roy Orbison – 6 December.

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Chapter 12: 1989

“I was supposed to be a graphic artist!”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- ‘Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade’ – Steven Spielberg, 24 May.
- ‘Dead Poets Society’ – Peter Weir, 2 June.
- ‘Hellbound: Hellraiser II’ – Tony Randel, 16 June.
- ‘Ghostbusters II’ – Ivan Reitman, 16 June.
- ‘Batman’ – Tim Burton, 23 June.
- ‘Uncle Buck’ – John Hughes, 16 August.
- ‘Back to the Future Part II’ – Robert Zemeckis, 22 November.

After the Christmas break work at the Ocean offices recommenced on Wednesday 4 January. It was all very quiet and my diary notes:

“Got on 7:00 train, usual stops, Rugby, Crewe and Manchester. Got to work about 10:00, hardly anyone there, no one doing anything.”

I was really hoping that I would be teamed up with a programmer today and be able to start on a fresh new game. No such luck. I spent the whole day twiddling my thumbs and wandering around the nearly empty programming department. Thing is, I had traveled back all the way from Northampton to Manchester just to sit around and do nothing. The weather outside was dull and grey and it was just all so depressing and this day had such a negative effect on me that I decided that I’d had enough was going to leave Ocean Software. My diary for this day ends with:

“I am fucked right off!”

Thursday was no better. Work was still quiet, Gary was off till the following Wednesday so I decided to tell Lorraine the day after on the Friday, after we’d been paid, that I was leaving. I spent that day, again, not doing anything and found out that Gary wasn’t at work because he was in Las Vegas. That probably didn’t help my mood. Here I was stuck down in the cellars at Ocean while Gary was off ‘gallivanting’ in America. I most probably thought “It just wasn’t fair”. Looking back now I should have been a bit more mature about it all rather than pulling a silly strop and wanting to leave a perfectly good job. I should have begged for something to do instead of huffing and puffing around the place. That’s all said in hindsight though. I still had a bit of growing up to do. I also bottled telling Lorraine I was going to leave as I had planned to do the day before. So by Friday it was time to go home to Northampton again. I’d spent three days doing nothing productive. Why did I even bother going to work? I’d as good as wasted a train fare and three days of my life just sitting around. After the weekend back at home Monday morning came and once again I got the train back to Manchester. That morning was spent helping Tracey Crook, one of the sales staff, find some reviews of Ocean games for inclusion in information packs. After dinner I spent the afternoon sat in the office with Rocky Ming, helping to test some of the faulty games that had been sent back after Christmas. This wasn’t really what I wanted to be doing with my time. I was supposed to be a graphic artist! Back at Bill’s flat I wrote in my diary:

*“(Is this my last week at OCEAN SOFTWARE LTD ever?)
We shall see. Find out soon! End of part one.”*

The next day I was informed I would be working on the Commodore 64 conversion of a newly acquired arcade licence, Taito’s ‘Chase HQ’. The arcade version of which had been released just the year before. All along I’d been told I would be working on the ZX Spectrum again. I didn’t want to work on the Commodore! Yes, I was in the wrong. I’d been given a project and I still wasn’t happy. Gary had no idea who the programmer was going to be yet so I couldn’t really do much until that had been decided and I had some guidelines to start with. It was literally pointless really

to begin drawing graphics for a game without knowing the dimensions of the stuff I had to draw. I thought at least I could have a play around with the art package and get to know how to use it so that's what I did. Following a walk round town during my dinner hour where I had a nose round Odyssey 7: Magazine and Poster Centre, the Corn Exchange, WHSmiths, HMV and Our Price I went back to work and drew two cars on the Commodore that afternoon, in preparation for working on 'Chase HQ'. That evening I watched 'Killer Klowns from Outer Space' (1988) and 'Young Sherlock Holmes' (1985) on VHS cassette. I thought they were both "quite good".

Wednesday 11 January arrived and I carried on messing about with my car graphic on the Commodore that I knew would never be used for anything. Commodore 64 artist Stephen Thomson recalls that he spent time trying to talk me out of leaving, he didn't want me to jack in my job and thought I'd be making a big mistake. I should have listened to him as he, it turns out, was completely right! Gary popped into the office then popped out again. During lunch Rocky Ming and I took a trip to Moss Side Precinct to buy some weed (not for me, I couldn't stand the stuff) which was an experience and a half as I was asked by Rocky to wait outside a betting shop surrounded by Rastafarians while he went in to make his purchase. Trips out during lunch with Rocky could be quite a laugh. He would regularly suck in his lips just as we were about to pass a little old lady then, just as we were about to pass them, would lean in towards them and shout out "BOO!", scaring them half to death. He also relieved the boredom of dealing with endless customer service calls by making up names to send faulty tapes to. One of his favourites was "Yes, mark it for the attention of Mr D.D. Dingle", the "D.D." standing for "Ding Dong"! Upon our arrival back at the Ocean offices Gary was there demonstrating a new possible arcade conversion in his office:

"Gary was showing Dave Ward and Paul Patterson 'The New Zealand Story', a cute arcade game."

A cursory glance around Gary's desk while he was upstairs revealed some interesting information about a new possible film license too:

"Found a leaflet on Gary's desk about a new Schwarzenegger film to be released in the summer of 1990! It's called 'Total Recall'."

I left work at twenty past four in the afternoon "bored". That was forty minutes early. No one missed me or asked me why I was going so early.

On Thursday 12 January I told Lorraine then Gary that I was terminating my employment at Ocean the next day. I didn't even have to give any notice. It wasn't like I had any work to finish. My last published piece of work for Ocean Software had been the 'Dragon Ninja' loading screen back on the 9 November. I had spent the last nine weeks and two days rattling around the basement at Ocean with no real project or objectives on the go. Nine whole weeks! I had just had enough of all the time I was wasting. It will come as no surprise to you that I didn't do anything work-wise this day and, at the end of it, got a lift home with Mike Lamb and John Brandwood back to the flat. The next day I packed as much as I could carry and spent my last day officially employed by Ocean Software doing nothing other than having lunch with Lorraine Broxton, Steve Wahid, Ivan Horn, Zach Townsend, Jobbee, Mike Lamb, John Brandwood, Andy Deakin and James Higgins at the Abercrombie pub, just round the corner from work. I left at half past three in the afternoon and got the earlier train home back to Manchester. That was it, I'd quit my job. All that was left to do was drive up with Conrad Bedford and Paul Aspinall the following Thursday 19 January to visit the flat I'd shared with Bill and collect the rest of my belongings that I couldn't carry back with me on the train the previous week. I popped back into Ocean one last time to collect a few bits there and said goodbye to everyone for the last time.

It's funny, without my diary I think I would have completely forgotten the reasons for me leaving Ocean when I did. My brain tends to make me, after time, forget the bad periods and only remember the good which in itself is probably a good thing. It's just a huge shame that I didn't keep a diary for the time I was happy at Ocean, which I was in the main. I just didn't realise, had I done so, how interesting that would have been to read back in the years to follow.

It just so happened that I ended up traveling back up to Manchester the very next day. Paul Aspinall, my old school friend, had a spare ticket to see Level 42 at the G-Mex and wondered if I wanted to go. It was £11 for the ticket. I'd only been to one gig so far, the Michael Jackson one, so I tagged along. I wasn't a fan of the band at all but I didn't have anything better to do. The concert

was so loud I couldn't hear properly for the next twenty four hours, I had to endure ringing in my ears. I also happened to see my Ocean colleague Zach Townsend in the audience, who'd been watching the concert stood behind me.

Back home in Northampton and now jobless I hadn't really thought about what I was going to do following my exit from Ocean. I didn't really need to back then as I could rely on Mum and Dad to put up with me still. One day, on one of my trips into town, I'd wandered in to NHCC and was told by Chris that not long before he had handed his notice in and there would soon be a full-time job going. Knowing the place like the back of my hand and having nothing else on the horizon I asked Graham and Ken if they'd have me back and they said yes straight away. I didn't even have to look for another job, it just fell at my feet. So I soon was back working in my old second home again. That was my main worry already out of the way, though I hadn't really done much actual worrying about it! I was happy enough being back there for a few months but soon the feeling sunk in that I wasn't really going anywhere and had taken a bit of a step backward. After having had games I worked on published all over the world I was back doing the same job I had been doing when I was 15!

Come mid-1989 Karl and Conrad left NHCC around the same time as each other. Conrad started working at a computer game and peripheral distributor called Leisuresoft, situated on the Brackmills industrial estate in Northampton. I was already in the mood for a change. I had no problems with working at NHCC, I still got on great with Graham and Ken but I guess I had just grown bored with it and fancied a new challenge. Along with the massive Centresoft in Birmingham, Leisuresoft was the other main software supplier of games for NHCC and numerous other computer shops around the country. Conrad gave me the nudge I needed and said I should try it out, telling me it was a nice place to work. I'd also be better off money-wise and he could put in a good word for me, which he did and I soon left NHCC (again) and followed. A few weeks before I left though I took the leap to the world of 16-bit computers and bought myself an Atari ST. Graham and Ken let me have one, not quite at cost price, but with a notable staff discount.

Leisuresoft was the only place I've ever worked that was slightly similar to the set up shown in Ricky Gervais's television show *'The Office'*. We didn't have a David Brent there thankfully but a lady called Laura who was in charge of the sales department. At first she terrified me. She was very strict and her taut, tied back hair reminded me of a teacher from Middle School who could go a bit overboard when having to tell off school kids. If you were even just a few minutes late you would be called in to her office for a stiff dressing down. She was definitely not one to be messed with. Once I got to know her though I found out she was lovely and her hard exterior was only there for show in order to keep a room full of late teenagers under control and their minds on the task of selling, selling and more selling. We all sat in a big office where all our desks were set out along with the obligatory office plants and flip charts. Below us was the huge warehouse where all the games, joysticks, peripherals and blank media were stored. First thing every morning we spent half an hour doing various team building exercises that would get us all geed up and enthusiastic to encourage us to sell more and "hit those targets!" The office thronged with the repeated shouts of "Yeah's", "Woooo's" and "Alright's"! Once all that was over with we all sat down for the day and started going through our own file of computer shops who we would have to ring once or twice a day and at specific times. In the morning we'd go through that day's new software releases with them and take orders for items their shop needed a restock of. Another call would usually follow in the afternoon just to see if anything else was needed before the order was packed up in the warehouse and sent out for delivery the next day. On the wall was a white board that recorded who had sold what and the person who had sold the most by the end of the day would be 'top of the league!' – "Wooooo!" You know, all that sort of stuff. I really didn't take to it. I hated trying to sell things to people who didn't really want them which you had to try and do if you were going to get anywhere near the 'top of the league' that day. You didn't get to see anyone other than who you were sat in the office with either – it was nothing like working in a shop where you'd never know who was going to walk in next. I also quickly learned that I hated talking to people on the phone that I didn't know – not a good quality for someone employed as a telesales adviser.

Leisuresoft had a good crowd there though. The firm employed at least ten telesales staff and we were all of a similar age though the sales staff didn't mix with the folks who worked in the warehouse. I don't think I was even introduced to any of them. Over the first few weeks I became mates with another telesales guy called Rodney Leiba. He was three years younger than me but we seemed to hit it off and he was a lovely fellow. I never really heard anyone call him Rodney

very often though and he was usually referred to as Rodders. I worked at Leisuresoft through the months of June and July and then decided that telesales really wasn't for me. I'd had enough of scorching red ears at the end of the day from being on the phone for eight hours. Plus all that "Whooping" and "Yeahing" at the start of work every day was beginning to grate.

During the two months that I had been employed at Leisuresoft Karl had been setting up his own computer and games shop right in the middle of Northampton town centre in College Street which he ended up calling Serv-U Computers. It was situated right next to the best chippy in Northampton which would work well in Karl's favour as it always saw a good footfall of passing customers due to its vicinity. Lots of people only discovered that the shop was actually there due to them walking past it to get to the chippy. Luckily my leaving NHCC coincidentally occurred at the same time Karl opened his shop and he was obviously looking to employ some staff to work for him. So, again, I fell out of one job straight into another and took on the role of Software Manager at Serv-U Computers. Karl was now working in direct competition with his former employers, Graham and Ken at NHCC. I had stayed friendly with my old bosses and continued to pop in every now and then if I happened to be passing but I felt no real guilt about defecting to their only real competitor, also set up by another ex-member of staff! I hadn't taken on the role to spite them. I just thought it'd be nice working in a brand new shop in a new location and I had got on fine with Karl up to now and saw no reason to think that, with him now being my boss, there'd be any problems, which there wasn't. I had supplied a cartoony drawing for the shop's carrier bags and loved the fact that everyone who bought something from the shop that was big enough to go in one went home with one of my silly drawings. We billed ourselves as '*Home and Business Computer Specialists*' on the bag and I had included a spoof poster of an Ocean game called '*Sputz*' – a take on the real Ocean game '*Gutz*' – on the cartoon window display shown on the drawing. Karl's shop had a lot more floor space than NHCC but barely any room to store stuff. Computers and printers that couldn't fit out on the shop floor had to be stored underneath the floor of the shop itself and the only way of getting to that space was through a tiny hole at the back of the shop near the staff toilets. It made keeping extras of items that sold well rather difficult. Right at the back was a set of stairs that led to the small office above the floor space. It made it easy for the boss to do any paperwork that needed doing while keeping an eye on how busy the shop itself was. Karl's fiancé at the time, Vanessa, who was a lovely girl, helped out at the start and also worked on Saturdays but the shop soon got too busy for just the three of us which meant that employing some Saturday lads in to help was soon necessary. It didn't take long for weekdays to get busy with the lunchtime period between noon and two sometimes being as busy as a Saturday. Karl soon needed to employ another full-time staff member and, after a round of interviews, Lee Hunter was working alongside us all.

While working at Serv-U we had seen a slow but steady increase of Atari ST and Commodore Amiga machine sales. Ocean had just released their '*Batman: The Movie*' game on the all the main formats at the end of September that turned out to be a massive seller to go alongside the block buster Tim Burton directed film that had just been released. It was around this time that I bought myself an Amiga to use at home along with a Commodore 1084s monitor and a half megabyte memory upgrade (a metal box that plugged in the expansion port underneath the computer itself). Again, I got a hefty staff discount on the price thanks to Karl. With the introduction of the Amiga '*Batman Pack*' sales of the machine sky rocketed – as soon as we bought in new stock in they were going out the door with their new owners. The distributor from whom we bought our stock of Amiga's from ran a 'who can sell the most '*Batman Pack*'s competition' for the independent retailers. The top prize was three tickets for a trip down to Pinewood Studios and entry for a do at the location in aid of the '*Variety Club*' children's charity. Serv-U ended up winning a set of tickets so one weekend morning in the spring of 1989 Conrad picked me and Chris Herbert up in his car and we made the one hour twenty minute drive down to Pinewood in Iver Heath, Buckinghamshire. None of us had ever been to a film studio before so it was all really quite exciting as we had no idea what to expect.

Once at the event at Pinewood – which was located out in the open (and the weather was a bit chilly that day) – we saw that in attendance were a few well known faces from British TV and film including Ernie Wise (of Morecambe and Wise), Colin Baker (who was the sixth Dr Who), Brian Glover (a well-known actor who was in '*American Werewolf in London*' and '*Alien 3*') and Faith Brown (an impressionist). We had no idea that famous people were going to be there so were pleasantly surprised to be rubbing shoulders with celebrities! After a while though it all got a little

boring. We weren't there to make a donation, not on our wages, and it soon became apparent that all the showbiz schmoozing was all about securing one. So, to alleviate our restless legs we went for a wander around the grounds to see what else we could find, if anything. It being the weekend Pinewood Studios was more or less deserted. We walked through a wood and over a stream and in the distance we could see a huge amount of scaffolding so, of course, we had to go have a look to see what was behind it. We found a small hole in a fence and we peered through it and what was in front of us? We had only stumbled upon '*Gotham City*'. It was the life size out door film set, designed by Anton Furst, for the already filmed but yet to be released '*Batman*' film, produced by Tim Burton and starring Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson. Filming had been completed a few months back in January 1989 so it had been a while since any work had been done on the set though it was still in pretty good condition. This was a momentous sight to see. The place was huge. None of us had ever been to a film set before (or since come to think of it). The sheer size, scale and look of the place was truly impressive and took my breath away, no word of a lie.

Unfortunately none of us had a camera that day. We kicked ourselves for not having the forethought that a trip down to Pinewood Studios could necessitate the taking of some souvenir snaps. So within a week we went back, this time armed with a camera and new rolls of film and took just over forty photographs. We hadn't seen the '*Batman*' film yet as it hadn't been released so we took pictures of everything we could find so that when it came for us to watch it we'd be able to say, "I've touched that!" or "I've stood there!" Turns out that we took photos of some props, including an unpainted statue of '*The Joker*', a multi coloured, spray painted car and locations that weren't even seen in the finished movie. We also noticed that the '*Flugelheim Museum*' was being given a fresh layer of paint to cover up the old paint that had already started to peel off. As we were wandering around the set there happened to be only one other person there, wandering about like we were. He was also taking pictures but he had a huge, professional looking camera with a long lens attached to it. Upon speaking to him he told us that they doing the set up in preparation for the eventual filming of the sequel. It turns out the producers of the film eventually changed their minds and didn't film '*Batman: Returns*' at Pinewood after all and filmed it in the USA. We then took a third trip back armed with another camera full of film and took a second set of photos which, unfortunately, appear to have vanished. Conrad was in charge of those and either they didn't come out or he forgot to get them processed. It's a great shame as I distinctly remember laying in the body shaped hole set in the ground underneath '*Gotham Cathedral*' and having my photo taken there. Upon seeing the film, which was released in June 1989, we saw that the hole was made to accommodate Jack Nicholson as this was where '*The Joker*' landed after falling off the cathedral and met his death.

We were all well aware of all the hype that surrounded the film at the time before we visited the set. You couldn't go anywhere without seeing it referenced in a magazine, billboard, on the television or emblazoned upon the side of a bus. Some of my mates were working on the game itself back up in Manchester at Ocean who had acquired the license. Even they didn't get to walk round '*Gotham City*'. Photos exist of a mass visit a few months after ours and you can see from those pictures that the set was really falling apart at that point. I count myself very lucky to have been able to visit '*Gotham City*' a total of three times and it looked more or less as it does in the film. Thankfully I kept the photos that I took and the negatives and they serve as permanent reminder to an amazing day.

Games players were now selling off their old 8-bit collections and bringing them in to the shop to part exchange for a 16-bit machine. I used this opportunity to collect original copies of most of those ZX Spectrum classics that I only had as a pirate copy and would excitedly go through each box brought in and pick the titles I wanted before putting the rest on the shelves in the second hand section. Best of all I managed to get myself a near set of original Ultimate Play the Game titles through the deluge of old games that were now coming into the shop. A distributor called Software City were also selling unsold and old ZX Spectrum titles that were clogging up their warehouse so I was able to buy in titles like the beautiful yellow box release of '*Doomdark's Revenge*' for 50p each. These were still sealed and in mint condition despite being five years old. I nabbed one for myself and the rest were sold in the shop for £2.99 each. My original ZX Spectrum collection grew immensely during this period. Most people didn't want their ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64 computers or games any more. The lure of titles like '*Xenon 2*' and '*Shadow of the Beast*' proved too much for some gamers and they had to find some way to fund the inevitable purchase of a next generation games computer. That usually meant getting rid of the

old one. That was fine by me! I guess I was now a '*retro gamer*' already, way back in 1989!

Back at home I had my Commodore Amiga and Atari ST set up in my bedroom as my main games playing machines. Underneath them, all on one desk, I still had a rubber keyed ZX Spectrum set up along with an Interface One and Microdrive so I could load up those classics I had compiled whilst at Ocean in an instant (more or less). I rarely bothered loading anything up from tape any more. The Atari ST got less and less use as the Amiga really had the edge over it games-wise so that ended up sat there gathering dust for the most part. Luckily I had dust covers for both of my 16-bit machines I'd bought from Serv-U Computers that stopped the dust from getting in any grooves! Two-player games with my sister, Nicola, on '*The New Zealand Story*', '*Bubble Bobble*' and '*Rainbow Islands*' were the more prominent memories I have of playing on my Amiga around this period.

Commodore Amiga software owned in 1989:

(Listed by year published and alphabetically: Title, developer/label)

Published in 1987:

1. '**Bard's Tale Vol. 1, The**' by Interplay/Electronic Arts.
2. '**Dungeon Master**' by Faster Than Light/Software Heaven Inc.
3. '**Typhoon Thompson**' by Dan Gorlin Productions/Broderbund.

Published in 1988:

4. '**Captain Blood**' by Exxos.
5. '**Battle Chess**' by Interplay Entertainment/Electronic Arts.
6. '**Bubble Bobble**' by Software Creations/Firebird.
7. '**Demon's Winter**' by Strategic Simulations Inc.
8. '**F/A-18 Interceptor**' by Intellisoft/Electronic Arts.
9. '**Federation of Free Traders**' by Paul Blythe/Gremlin Graphics.
10. '**Heroes of the Lance**' by U.S.Gold/Strategic Simulations Inc.
11. '**Hybris**' by Cope-Com/Discovery Software.
12. '**Journey: The Quest Begins**' by Infocom Inc.
13. '**STOS the Game Creator**' by Mandarin Software.
14. '**War in Middle Earth**' by Synergistic/Melbourne House.
15. '**Zany Golf**' by Sandcastle Productions/Electronic Arts.

Published in 1989:

16. '**Amiga Ten Star Pack**' – This was a pack of games that came with the Amiga computer itself and contained:

'**Amegas**' by Pandora – 1987.

'**The Art of Chess**' by SPA – 1987.

'**Barbarian: The Ultimate Warrior**' by Palace – 1988.

'**Buggy Boy**' by Elite Systems – 1988.

'**Ikari Warriors**' by Elite Systems– 1988.

- 'Insanity Fight'** by Microdeal – 1987.
'Mercenary: Escape from Targ & The Second City' by Novagen – 1988.
'Terrorpods' by Psygnosis – 1987.
'Thundercats' by Elite – 1988.
'Wizball' by Ocean Software – 1988.
17. **'Batman the Movie'** by Ocean Software.
 18. **'Battle Squadron'** by Cope-Com/Innerprise Software.
 19. **'Bio Challenge'** by Delphine.
 20. **'Blood Money'** by DMA Design/Psygnosis.
 21. **'Bloodwych'** by Anthony Taglione, Pete James and Philip Taglione / Image Works.
 22. **'Dragon's Lair'** by Visionary Design/ReadySoft Inc.
 23. **'Drakkhen'** by Infogrames.
 24. **'F29 Retaliator'** by Digital Image Design/Ocean Software.
 25. **'Forgotten Worlds'** by Arc Developments/U.S.Gold.
 26. **'Galdregon's Domain'** by David Neale/Pandora.
 27. **'Ghouls'n Ghosts'** by Software Creations/U.S.Gold.
 28. **'Interphase'** by The Assembly Line/Image Works.
 29. **'Kult'** by Exxos, Ere Informatique/Infogrames.
 30. **'New Zealand Story, The'** by Choice Software/Ocean Software.
 31. **'Onslaught'** by Realms/Hewson Consultants.
 32. **'Populous'** by Bullfrog/Electronic Arts.
 33. **'Purple Saturn Day'** by Exxos, Ere Informatique/Epyx Inc.
 34. **'Quest for the Time Bird, The'** by Infogrames Europe SA.
 35. **'Rainbow Islands'** by Graftgold/Ocean Software.
 36. **'Rick Dangerous'** by Core Design Limited/Firebird.
 37. **'Shadow of the Beast'** by Reflections/Psygnosis.
 38. **'Silkworm'** by The Sales Curve/Virgin Mastertronic.
 39. **'Space Ace'** by ReadySoft Inc.
 40. **'Strider'** by Tiertex/U.S.Gold.
 41. **'Sword of Sodan'** by Discovery Software.
 42. **'Warhead'** by Motion Picture House/Activision.

43. **'Xenon 2 Megablast'** by The Assembly Line/Image Works.

I don't really have the same recollection about the 16-bit games I owned during these years than I do of the ZX Spectrum games I bought. I've often wondered why that is. One reason could be that these games didn't have as much of an impact on me as the ones I had played during the Spectrum years. There was a bit of 'I've seen it all before' about some of the new 16-bit games. A lot of the first UK written 16-bit games were just vamped up versions of older 8-bit titles and didn't really offer anything extra other than a bit more colour and maybe some extra levels and extra sound. Sometimes the games were actually worse to play than their Spectrum, Commodore or Amstrad counterparts as those older machines didn't have the fancy graphics that could be used to hide shoddy game play and dodgy programming. I also didn't keep any receipts from any of my purchases during this time so the order in which I purchased them is long forgotten. I also didn't actually buy many, if any, Atari ST games.

The gap between me buying my Atari ST and Commodore Amiga computers was a month at the most and I immediately favoured the Amiga and then barely used the ST. Some of these games I maybe didn't actually buy and could have been borrowed, with permission of course, for a week or two from the stock of the shop I was employed at. Don't get me wrong, there are some fantastic games for the Amiga. Titles like *'Xenon 2'*, *'Hybris'*, *'Battle Squadron'*, *'The New Zealand Story'* and *'Rainbow Islands'* were getting close to actually having real arcade machines in your bedroom. Other games like *'Dungeon Master'*, *'Eye of the Beholder'*, *'The Immortal'* and *'Drakkhen'* offered a depth of game play not previously available on the old 48k of ram the Spectrum had. The extra memory and the fact that information could now be loaded relatively quickly via disc rather than the laborious tape method meant that new games could offer you whole new worlds that had previously only existed inside the programmer's head. Some games were just down right too weird for their own good. Games like *'Captain Blood'*, *'Kult'* and *'Quest for the Time Bird'* looked pretty but never really knew what the hell I was supposed to be doing and that was with having the instruction booklets to hand to read. The higher resolution graphics and more colours meant that everything looked more realistic than the old ZX Spectrum days. Though I would maybe say that could sometimes be a drawback as I quite liked the fact that, with 8-bit graphics, you were forced to add the colour and the details that weren't present by using your own imagination, leading you to create your own interpretation of what you were seeing on your television screen. I think, looking back, I actually preferred that!

THOSE WE LOST IN 1989:

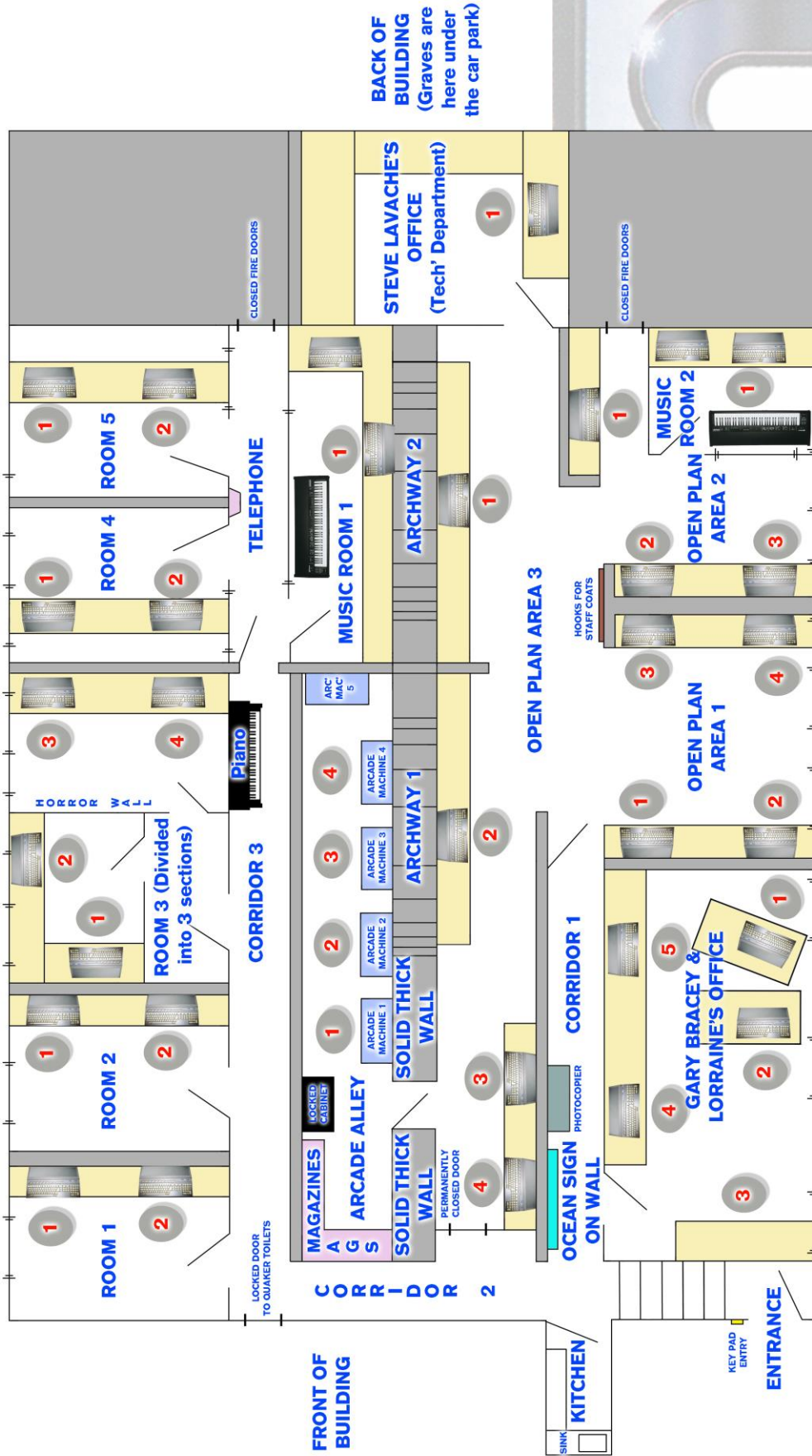
Salvador Dali – 23 January.

Mel Blanc – 10 July.

Laurence Olivier – 11 July.

Graham Chapman – 4 October.

Lee Van Cleef – 16 December.



PLAN OF THE DUNGEONS AT 6 CENTRAL STREET, MANCHESTER AS IT WAS BETWEEN 1987 AND 1989.
© 2015 MARK R. JONES



Chapter 13: Ocean Software Layout: Plan of the basement (the 'Dungeon') at 6 Central Street, Manchester circa late 1986 – early 1989.

This section features as much information as I can recall about what the programming area of Ocean looked while I was employed by the company. Ocean, situated in a '*Friends Meeting House*' built in 1828, occupied the top floor for the business side of things and the basement was where the games were written. Quakers, a Christian movement, owned the building and used the ground floor. I have talked about who sat where and what projects were completed in what part of the building. Obviously people moved desks and rooms and I do not lay any claims to this guide being definitive. The Atari ST's shown at the desks in the illustrations are there just to show where people worked. It doesn't necessarily mean there was an Atari ST there though in lots of cases there was. Before mid-1987 the main machines that programmers coded on were Tatung Einstein's. These were consigned to gathering dust once the Atari ST development system was up and running.

ENTRANCE:

This shows the door that, in order to gain entry, required staff to type in a four-digit number code on the electronic key pad by the **Entrance**. The door would unlock, you'd walk down six steps and you'd reach the programming area. This door was a heavy fire door and the 'slam' made as it shut was so loud that it was heard throughout the programming department. During filming of the '*Chegwin Checks It Out*' TV insert staff had to be told not to enter the basement during filming as the loud slam made any film unusable. At the bottom of the stairs, to the left, was the tiny kitchen area – it was that small that you couldn't fit more than three people in there at any one time and that was at a squeeze. In there was a cupboard on the wall, a sink, fridge, kettle and numerous Ocean mugs. Straight on was a short corridor to the second programming area and, at about two o'clock, a white and blue Perspex Ocean sign was affixed to the wall. Underneath it, slightly to the right of the sign was a photocopying machine. Turn to your right and you're in **Corridor 1**. On your immediate right was the door to **Gary & Lorraine's Office**. Gary Bracey sat at his desk on seat **1** in front of his PC computer and Lorraine's desk was situated in front of his and she sat on seat **2**. She also had a PC. There was at least two telephones in here. There were various machines set up in the room on the two long work benches so that staff could check the progress of games that were currently being worked on out-of-house (seats **4 & 5**). Lee Cowley and Kane Valentine and, later, Rocky Ming, also worked in this room. Lee was usually sat at seat **3**, play testing the latest version of the games currently in production. Lee, Kane and Rocky would also check the software that games buyers had sent back as faulty. Packages addressed to the non-existent 'Mr Yates', as detailed on most of Ocean's tape inlays, were opened and examined in this room. 'Mr Yates' had been invented so that should a package arrive bearing his name then it would be obvious this was a faulty game. A real person's name was not used as, for one, it would be unfair to burden one person with all the faulty software enquiries that Ocean had to deal with and two, had they used a real person's name there was a chance that they could leave, thus rendering the name on the printed inlay obsolete. 'Mr. Yates' was never going to leave Ocean and go and get another job. There were always two big black bins in this room in which the faulty tapes, inlays and boxes would go should they fail to load. The general rule was that, if nothing could be found wrong with the tape it would be posted back to the owner. Nine times out of ten it didn't come back again. If it did then it would be binned and a new copy sent.

This is the office I had my interview in at the start of 1987, though Lorraine had not joined at this point so her desk was not present. Mum and I sat in front of Gary's desk for the duration. Later there was a full arcade machine of '*Operation Wolf*' set up in the corridor underneath the Ocean sign. This was before a circuit board had become available of the game that Steve Lavache could install in **Arcade Alley**. It was probably placed in front of Gary's office to discourage staff from spending an overly long period of time playing on it and so that Gary didn't have far to walk so he could have a go himself!

Back out of the office and turn right, down the corridor is the first programming area.

OPEN PLAN AREA 1:

At seat **1** sat Commodore 64 programmer Zach Townsend and next to him on seat **2**, his Commodore 64 graphics partner, Andy Sleigh. This is where *'Platoon'* on that machine was written by them both, the only version to be created in-house. The ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC versions were out sourced to Choice Software, a development house based in Carrickfergus, County Antrim, who did a lot of work for Ocean through the years.

On seat **4** is where I sat on my very first day. It was here that I drew my *'Never Go with Strangers'* loading screen on the ZX Spectrum and then, the loading screens for *'Mag Max'* on both the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC. I also started work here on the graphics to the coin op conversion of *'Athena'* before being taken off the project and given the ZX Spectrum version of *'Wizball'* to do in another part of the building.

Soon after, Ivan Horn and Andrew Deakin sat here at seats **3** and **4** and here they stayed for most, if not all, of their time at Ocean. Ivan was the graphics man and Andrew the coder. It was here that *'Athena'*, *'Operation Wolf'* and their sections of *'Combat School'* and *'Rambo III'* were written for the ZX Spectrum (and Amstrad CPC for *'Rambo III'* as they wrote both versions of that title). Commodore 64 graphics man Stephen 'Jolly' Thomson also sat at seat **3** for a couple of months.

In early 1987, the very first version of *'Head Over Heels'*, then called *'Foot and Mouth'*, was loaded up at the ZX Spectrum set up at seat **3** by Jon Ritman who had come to visit Ocean for the day. It was the first time anyone at Ocean had seen the game.

Keith Chegwin also sat at seat **3** on Friday 8 July 1988 to carry out the filming of him asking questions for the interview with me which had just been filmed in **Room 2**. David Blake also sat at seat **3** when they filmed his unused interview on the same day.

I also recall Paul Hughes sitting at seat **4** when he was busy mastering a Commodore 64 game. Paul thinks it may have been *'Wizball'*. Bill Barna, who had mastered Ocean's previous Commodore 64 titles had just left the company and that task had now been passed on to him. I had just walked in from **Corridor 1** to be greeted by one of the Ocean directors screaming "I don't give a monkey's wank!" at poor Paul. I had never heard that expression before, nor have I heard it since! I quickly scuttled off out of the way. Apparently, some German hackers had gotten hold of an Ocean master maker and posted it in to Ocean mocking Paul in the process. The director immediately blamed Paul for leaking it, despite him spending every waking hour trying to protect Ocean's games. Paul had not leaked the code. Later, after some Ocean staff had been offered U.S.Gold master makers while mastering games at Ablex (where Ocean got all their games reproduced), the bosses realised what had gone on and who leaked their code. The staff responsible at Ablex then got a huge bollocking from Ocean.

OPEN PLAN AREA 2:

Colin Porch was permanently sat at seat **1** here coding titles for the Commodore 64. When I started in February 1987 Colin was finishing off *'Double Take'* for the machine. Later on he wrote the Commodore 64 conversions of *'Head Over Heels'*, *'Gryzor'*, some of *'Combat School'* and *'Operation Wolf'*. Colin had a lamp here as his corner was so dark and he frequently burnt his head on it after concentrating on some coding problem, head bowed down over his notes. Frequent swear words and cries of "Oww!" and worse expletives were regularly heard in this vicinity. To the right of Colin was a fire door that was always closed.

At the same time Simon Butler, graphics, started out at seat **3** working alongside Commodore 64 programmer Paul Hughes and it is here where their conversion of *'Mag Max'* was written. Commodore 64 graphics man Stephen 'Jolly' Thomson also sat at seat **2** for a while.

Later on the programming and graphics team of James Higgins and Martin MacDonald were sat here. James in seat **3** and Martin in seat **2**.

Installed not long into 1987 was the second closed off room used for music production. Before this there had just been another bench here. A musician needed to be able to hear what they were working on and had to work in an area that could be closed off from everyone else. Gari Biasillo, Peter Clarke, Roger Fenton and Matthew Cannon all used this room to compose their musical compositions in (though not all at the same time, it was a tiny room). This room was also used, on occasion, for games testing duties by Rocky Ming, Kane Valentine and Lee Cowley. This is the room where Rocky lit his exploding cigarette.

STEVE LAVACHE'S OFFICE:

Here Steve would fix any of Ocean's computers that weren't working properly and where he constructed the arcade games in metal brief cases that were used as prizes in various competitions ('*Arkanoid*', '*Renegade*' and '*Typhoon*' are three that spring to mind). He also prepared the arcade boards before they were installed in **Arcade Alley** in this room.

Steve's room had the dubious of honour of having, just through the wall, hundreds of bodies still buried of various Quaker people who had passed away years before. A stone plaque on the wall in the car park above states:

"THIS PLOT
WAS PART OF A BURIAL GROUND
USED BY THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS
FROM 1796 TO 1856
THE REMAINS OF SOME 600 FRIENDS
STILL REST HERE"

OPEN PLAN AREA 3 – ARCHWAY 2:

Come out of Steve's office and to the right was one programming station, situated under a brick archway. I can only recall ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC programmer Jon 'O'Brien (Jobbee) sitting here at seat **1**. Here he programmed '*Chase HQ*' on the Spectrum and Amstrad CPC and '*The Untouchables*', '*Wec Le Mans*' and '*Burning Rubber*' for the Amstrad CPC. I won't go into the details about **Music Room 1** just yet as you were unable to access it from this part of the building.

OPEN PLAN AREA 3 – ARCHWAY 1:

Here sat Amstrad CPC programmer John Brandwood at seat **2**. Here he wrote the code for '*Short Circuit*', '*Renegade*' and '*Gryzor*' for that machine. Mark K. Jones sat at seat **4** where he produced the graphics for the same titles. Shaun Ridings is pictured sitting at seat **3** next to Mark K. Jones in one of the photos that exist from this time. He was a trainee Commodore 64 artist under the wings of Steve Wahid. ZX Spectrum graphics man Bill Harbison also spent a lot of his time at Ocean sat on seat **4**. Here he worked on '*Chase HQ*', '*Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge*' and '*Dragon Ninja*'. David 'Ice' Thompson sat at seat **3** where he coded '*Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge*' for the same machine. I also sat at seat **3** when I was helping out with the ZX Spectrum conversion of '*Dragon Ninja*' with Bill, producing some background graphics and the loading screen.

It was here, on Tuesday 4 October 1988, at the table for seats **3** and **4**, that staff huddled together to watch the broadcast of the '*Chegwin Checks It Out*' segment that had been filmed down here on Friday 8 July 1988.

To the back of these seats is the famous **Arcade Alley**. The door had to be closed for most of the time as the noise from the arcade machines sitting idly in attract mode distracted the people sitting in this area. Once in **Arcade Alley**, set out in front of you, was Ocean's magazine archive that had been built up over the years on metal shelving. There was also a locked filing cabinet in here that contained the promotional Ocean bags and t-shirts. This was locked to stop staff from helping themselves to the various promotional goodies held within. To the right was space for five arcade machines, though rarely were there five machines in every place up and running. Here staff could play for free the titles they were converting in order to get the feel for the game play and for copying the graphics down on to paper for conversion on to the relevant home machines. You were also allowed to have a few games during your lunch hour should you so wish.

CORRIDOR 2:

This is the short corridor that linked the first part of the building to the second. That little section to the right at the start of **Corridor 2** was where sweeping brushes, dust pan and brushes and bins were kept.

CORRIDOR 3 – ROOM 1:

ZX Spectrum programmer Mike Lamb had permanent residence at seat **1** here in this room. At the start of 1987 he was in here with Ronnie Fowles, who sat next to Mike, at seat **2**. Mike wrote his first Ocean game, '*Top Gun*' for the ZX Spectrum in here. Ronnie produced the graphics for '*Short Circuit*' here too for programmer Paul Owens who was working in the next room. After that Mike and Ronnie together wrote '*Renegade*', '*Arkanoid*' and '*Arkanoid – Revenge of Doh*' for the ZX Spectrum here.

Ronnie then left the company and Dawn Drake started so she took his place at seat 2. The pair produced *'Target: Renegade'*, *'Robocop'* and *'Batman: The Movie'* for the ZX Spectrum in this room. Mike and Dawn also worked on the 16-bit version of the film license for *'Batman: The Movie'* here also.

CORRIDOR 3 – ROOM 2:

At the start of 1987 ZX Spectrum programmer Steve Watson was seated at seat 1 and I was at seat 2 to produce the Spectrum conversion of *'Wizball'*. Steve left before the project was finished and Paul Owens then came in to finish it off. Paul took over at seat 1 and Paul and myself then worked on *'Gryzor'* and *'The Vindicator'* in this room together.

I was filmed in here for the programme presented by Keith Chegwin called *'Chegwin Checks It Out'* on Friday 8 July 1988. I was sat at my desk at seat 2 for the interview. The loading screens for the Spectrum versions of *'Wizball'*, *'Tai-Pan'*, *'Gryzor'*, *'Mutants'*, *'Arkanoid – Revenge of Doh'* and *'The Vindicator'* were also produced in this room by myself.

CORRIDOR 3 – ROOM 3:

When I started at Ocean in February 1987 this area was one large room with no dividing walls. At this point Commodore 64 programmer David Collier was sitting on the left side of the room where he programmed *'Arkanoid'*, *'Dragon Ninja'*, *'Target: Renegade'* and his sections of *'Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge'*. Trainee Commodore 64 programmer Darren Dunn sat on the other side of the bench next to David. On the other side of the room, on the right, Allan Shortt sat at seat 3 and his graphics partner Simon Butler sat at seat 4. This is where Simon drew the graphics for *'Athena'* and *'Combat School'*. Allan programmed *'Yie Ar Kung Fu 2'*, *'Mario Bros'*, *'Arkanoid – Revenge of Doh'* and *'Athena'* here.

Sometime in 1987 the room was divided up with some false walls as shown here. David Collier then worked in the smaller room on the left and Allan and Simon stayed where they were. They now had a wall right behind them. On this wall is where the **Horror Wall** was assembled. Simon would cut the grossest photos out of *'Fangoria'* magazine and made a huge and ever changing collage. Commodore 64 artist John Palmer used the small room here too and also sat at seat 3. In either of these two places he drew the graphics for *'Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge'*, *'Dragon Ninja'*, *'Target: Renegade'* and *'Wec Le Mans'*. Commodore 64 programmer Rick Palmer, John's brother, also sat at seat 4 where he programmed his sections of *'Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge'*, *'Operation Thunderbolt'*, *'Wec Le Mans'* and *'The New Zealand Story'* for that machine. Sometimes three people would be working at the bench on the right of the room.

CORRIDOR 3 – ROOM 4:

At the start of 1987 two Commodore 64 artists sat in this room. Steve Wahid was at seat 1. Here is where Steve produced the graphics for the Commodore 64 versions of *'Renegade'*, *'Slap Fight'*, *'Gryzor'*, and *'Arkanoid – Revenge of Doh'*.

Jane Lowe sat at seat 2. Jane drew her graphics for *'Mario Bros'*, *'Renegade'*, *'Army Moves'*, *'Game Over'* and *'Rastan Saga'* in this room. She also drew the loading screen for the Commodore 64 version of *'Head Over Heels'* here.

In mid-1988 I worked at seat 1 while I produced the graphics for the Atari ST version of *'Rambo III'*. John Brandwood also sat at seat 1 for some of his time at Ocean.

In the film clip from *'Chegwin Checks It Out'* an Amiga computer can be seen displaying an animation of a cash register opening along with the words 'LOADS A MONEY' that had been drawn by an Ocean artist especially for the television programme. This was set up at seat 2 in order to be filmed and part of that set up can be seen in the 'making of' footage from that day.

CORRIDOR 3 – ROOM 5:

John Meegan sat at seat 1 for the entire time I was working at Ocean. Here he wrote many Commodore 64 games. When I commenced my employment he had not long finished *'Short Circuit'* and was working on the arcade conversion of *'Slap Fight'*. *'Rastan Saga'*, *'The Vindicator'* and *'Robocop'* were also coded here. There's a good chance that *'Operation Thunderbolt'* and *'The Untouchables'* were coded here too. In February 1987 Mark K. Jones was sat at seat 2 where he was working on the graphics for the Commodore 64 version of *'Arkanoid'*. Simon Butler then sat at seat 2 where he worked on the design for *'Platoon'* and produced the graphics for *'The Vindicator'*. Afterwards, Stephen 'Jolly' Thomson sat at seat 2 and drew the graphics for the Commodore 64

version of *'Robocop'*.

MUSIC ROOM 1:

When starting at Ocean this was Martin Galway's music room and in it he had his development system along with the target machines – Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum and, occasionally, an Amstrad CPC. Martin didn't stay for very long after I had started at Ocean as he was in the process of leaving the company to go and start working at Origin in America. Also in this room was a Roland D-50 synthesizer that Martin would use for composing tunes on and I would occasionally mess around with it if I fancied a break and the room was empty. It was state-of-the-art at that time as these were newly released on to the market in 1987.

When Martin had left Jonathan Dunn took his place in this room and, again, is where he produced all of his music. The room was featured in the *'Chegwin Checks It Out'* film footage from 1988. Keith Chegwin was filmed messing around on the Roland and the television crew filmed Jonathan and Keith miming to the show's theme tune. Footage from this was featured during the titles to the programme though a copy of it hasn't surfaced yet for us to be able to watch it now.

A fifteen minute computer simulated walk round the basement floor of Ocean Software, written by Rob Southworth, and with me acting as your narrator and tour guide, is available to watch on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/flrkarvivzU>

Chapter 14: 1990

“..held hostage at Ocean HQ until he handed in a finished game.”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

'Nightbreed' – Clive Barker, 16 February.

'Back to the Future Part III' – Robert Zemeckis, 25 May.

'Total Recall' – Paul Verhoeven, 1 June.

'Gremlins II: The New Batch' – Joe Dante, 15 June.

'Wild at Heart' – David Lynch, 17 August.

'Goodfellas' – Martin Scorsese, 19 September.

Sometime around the start of the year I had come to the conclusion that I wasn't putting my artistic talents to use by working in a computer shop again. Once the novelty of working in Karl's new establishment had worn off it just felt the same as working at NHCC. I wasn't learning anything new and, more importantly, wasn't capitalising on all the things I had learned while working at Ocean so I decided to try and make it as a freelance graphic artist. I still had an Atari ST and Commodore Amiga computer at home and all the software that was needed to enable me to make graphics for games. I had amassed enough bits of graphic work that I'd produced in my spare time for both machines to cobble together a demo disc for each. So I set about writing to some computer games companies in order to try and make a living by working at home as a computer graphic designer.

At the beginning of April I got the train down to London to catch up with some of my old Ocean buddies at the '*European Computer Trade Show*', Stand G17, Business Design Centre, Islington, London, N1 that ran from the 1 – 3 of the month. Ocean had another impressive stand set up to show off their latest titles but I have literally memory of being there at all. I only know for certain that I did go because some photos surfaced a few years ago from ex-Ocean staffer Ivan Horn that picture me having a laugh and a drink or two with some of the Ocean staff on their stand. For some reason I'm wearing a suit. I have absolutely no idea why. I must have had something else to do in London that day, maybe a job interview? I would have never wore a suit for pleasure as I can't stand the things. Usually when I see photos for the first time years after they were taken they act as a key to a long locked away memory in my head and I, at the very least, then have some recollection of the circumstances the photo was taken in. With these photos there wasn't anything, zilch. Maybe I just got a little bit too drunk that day to retain any lasting memory of it?

Around the beginning of July I had received a phone call from my old Ocean buddy Simon Butler. He had just started work at a new company situated in Room 232 at I-Mex House, 40 Princess Street in Manchester city centre called Active Minds. The company had just been set up by a two person team who I shall refer to as DC and AK. Active Minds had two games in the early stages of development - one was '*Gazza II*' for Empire and the other was '*Total Recall*' for Ocean Software, which was a massive film license based on the new Arnold Schwarzenegger blockbuster. I remembered I'd originally heard about the film on 11 January 1988 when I'd found some information that had been sent to Gary Bracey from Carolco, the company making the film, on his desk. Simon filled me in on what had been going on so far at Active Minds and then came the “but”. Somehow I knew there'd be a “but”!

Apparently the '*Gazza II*' title was on track but work had already fallen well behind with the Ocean game and it was time for some drastic action to be taken or the whole thing could very well go tits up. Simon had told the two directors of Active Minds that the game design they had for '*Total Recall*' “while containing all the necessary elements, plus a few unnecessary ones, was far too loose” and that most, if not all, of the work they'd done, which wasn't much anyway, was unusable. If they wanted to get anything ready in time then they'd most probably have to start all over again. The so-called 'lead artist' on the game was sacked once it was made apparent to the bosses how they'd had the wool pulled over their eyes for the past few months and that none of his work was up to scratch. Simon had told DC and AK that he knew some trusted people he could get in to help out to produce work to the standard required and get it completed quickly. I was one of those people. Despite all this I readily accepted the offer that had just been presented to me. It was

decided that I would work for two days in the Active Minds offices on Princess Street and the remaining three would be spent working at home in Northampton. My employment with Active Minds commenced on Tuesday 10 July 1990 on a basic salary of £12,000 per year. I could easily arrange to stay over at an Ocean mate's house for the one night a week I was up in Manchester – between them Dawn Drake, John Palmer and Kane Valentine ended up helping me out. Simon had also managed to find Mark K. Jones, my old flat mate who had left Ocean around the end of 1987, and he had also just started working on the project on a freelance basis. Things were looking up again. This was just the sort of arrangement that I originally wanted at Ocean before I was told I'd have to relocate. A trip up to the Active Minds offices was arranged for as soon as possible and within a few days I found myself walking the familiar streets of Manchester city centre again. The sun was shining that day too - so that helped to fuel the feeling of positivity I now had.

When I arrived at the offices Simon expanded on what he had told me over the phone and that, basically, the company could soon be in serious trouble with Ocean if they couldn't demonstrate that *'Total Recall'* was nearing completion, which it wasn't! Simon was of the opinion that the two owners of the company hadn't got a clue what they were doing and, after meeting them for the first time, I had to agree. They were so naive I probably could have explained to them that my Spectrum wasn't working because I had ran out of coal resulting in them scrabbling about trying to find some to shovel into the interface port at the back. We came to the conclusion the two of them must have bluffed it good and proper when they offered to produce a major computer game for all the five major formats – ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC, Commodore Amiga and Atari ST – for the then biggest UK software house and whoever they saw at Ocean had fell for their spiel hook, line and sinker. How on earth they managed that we hadn't got a clue! The only positive we could see was that Ocean's headquarters were literally just a four minute walk from the offices of Active Minds. You would have thought that someone from Ocean would have taken advantage of that and kept a closer eye on things but that wasn't happening. Active Minds had more or less been left to their own devices. *'Total Recall'* was supposed to be one of the big Ocean Christmas sellers, so there was no way it could possibly be allowed to be so delayed that it came out after the festive period. All those possible Christmas present purchases would be lost. I could see this was going to be hard work but Simon was sure that between us and the rest of the small group of seasoned programmers and artists now at Active Minds it wasn't altogether impossible. We had to get something impressive up and running real soon.

Simon, by now, had a new updated design for *'Total Recall'*, dated the day before I signed my contract, which would now be the document we'd be working from. At the start of my first day I was told that 'ACE' magazine (short for 'Advanced Computer Entertainment') wanted a screenshot of the one of the levels on the Spectrum version for their next issue. Talk about being thrown in at the deep end! Still, I knew how to rustle something up really quickly and spent the whole day preparing a mock-up screen that would look like a real game so that it could be sent to the magazine in the last post. I was a little bit put out at the tiny time frame I had to work out what the whole level might look so, on the screen, I added, in the section that shows which objects have been picked up, a used tampon complete with white base and a red end! It was very childish of me but it amused me, at the time. I didn't take in to account that fact I could get into serious trouble for it, or even end up getting sacked - that never even crossed my mind. I just didn't think about any of the consequences. I just wanted to see if they'd print it!

One of the good things about working at Active Minds was that one of my old childhood Spectrum programming 'heroes' was also working there. A few years back I had purchased the ZX Spectrum games *'Max Headroom'*, *'180'*, *'Rasterscan'*, *'Amaurote'* and *'Zub'* all of which had been written by the Pickford brothers. One of them, John, was now working for the same company as me. He was the programmer for *'Gazza II'* on the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC. I was pleased when it became apparent that we got on with each other very well and became friends. John was and, for all I know, is still a top fellow.

The atmosphere in the Active Minds offices was very relaxed. Too relaxed actually and that's probably why they were in this mess in the first place. We'd have the radio on all day and in the afternoon, during the Steve Wright show, which was on Radio 1 in 1990, he'd have someone on doing an Arnold Schwarzenegger impression. Arnie was a recurring character in the show and was fond of his "Uzi nine millimetre". They'd have him doing monologues that always ended in some pun on the *'Total Recall'* film. The one I remember most clearly was *'Total Refund'*. It all seemed so appropriate given which game we were working on at the time.

Now, you would have thought with the certain amount of urgency that was required to get *'Total Recall'* off the ground that it would be all hands on deck so to speak and we'd be concentrating on that one sole, important, title. It would make sense surely? Well, no – I also had to work on some graphics for the Amiga and ST versions of *'Gazza II'* and I may have helped out on the ZX Spectrum version. I'm given a credit in the instructions but have no recollection of actually doing any work for it. Simon had taken care of the graphics for the football match itself on the 16-bit versions so I worked on various icons that were needed for the management section of the game. It could have been that I'd done all the graphics I could so far for the ZX Spectrum *'Total Recall'* and that I was waiting for the programmer to catch up. Thing is, he didn't. I barely ever saw him when I went up there for my two days in Manchester each week. I think I only saw him two or three times at the most. I was always eager to see the new, improved version of the game but it got that, from week to week, I wasn't seeing much, if any, difference from what I'd seen seven days before. I was beginning to experience déjà vu and was reminded of when *'Wizball'* was being coded and not much progress was ever in evidence from one week to the next.

The next issue of *'ACE'* magazine was soon out – issue 36 from September 1990 – and the main graphic on the cover was a still from the *'Total Recall'* film. Obviously I was keen to see if my mocked up ZX Spectrum screenshot, along with aforesaid used female sanitary product, had made it into the magazine. I eagerly turned to where it was, on page 6. They'd devoted a double page spread to the game and there in the middle of the first page was my screen. I looked at it and the first thing I noticed was that all the colours were wrong! The status panel I'd inked in cyan was now magenta. My *'Total Recall'* logo looked naff – the red part of it was now green! Nobody could really tell what it was supposed to be anymore. Someone at the magazine must have spotted my used tampon and had a last minute panic then hastily arranged to have the colours changed. Darn! I'd been foiled but at least they'd actually printed it. Looking back now it was a rather silly thing to do. I could have caused myself a whole heap of aggravation had the bosses at Ocean noticed. Simon had mocked up some Amiga screenshots himself and they were both in the feature but all with the correct colours used – proof that only my screen had been doctored. A box out in the article listed the Active Minds team and documents who they were, what their role was and some past work:

Project Leader:
DC (boss of Active Minds)
Amiga/ST programmer:
FRED O'ROURKE (*Laser Squad, Scramble Spirits*)
Spectrum/CPC programmer:
PAUL HOUBART (*Highlander, Road Runner, Leaderboard*)
C64 programmer:
MIKE LYONS (*Midwinter, War in Middle Earth*)
Graphic Designers:
SIMON BUTLER (*Robocop, Platoon, Renegade*)
MARK JONES, Senior (*Gryzor, Renegade, Arkanoid*)
MARK JONES, Junior (*Wizball, Dragon Ninja, Arkanoid*)
Musician:
DAVID WHITTAKER (*Back to the Future II, Shadow of the Beast, Xenon II*)

Meanwhile back at the Active Minds offices, or, as we'd now renamed our place of employment, Un-Active Minds, things were plodding along. I hadn't seen the ZX Spectrum programmer of *'Total Recall'* for a good few weeks now and, eventually, was informed that he was now 'working at home'. Whenever I asked where the latest version of the game was – as I wanted to see how far it had progressed since my last visit and see which of my new graphics had been implemented – I was given the excuse "He's promised it for tomorrow". As we all know, whatever day it is, tomorrow is always tomorrow and never actually gets here. This was exactly how it panned out for our ZX Spectrum version of *'Total Recall'*.

We were now entering the month of October. The game had been in development for nearly four months and was nowhere near finished. It wasn't even at a playable stage yet! The Christmas deadline was looming. A last ditch revamp of the design was put together by Simon on 29 October 1990. No one other than a few members of reliable staff appeared to show any interest

in the game anymore. DC and AK were oblivious to what was going on around them. Any questions we aimed at them were replied with answers that didn't make any real sense which only resulted in me and Simon giving each other funny looks across the room. Finally it got to the point where Simon was faced with no other choice but to walk across to Ocean, which took him all of four minutes, where he spoke to Gary Bracey and told him about the state of the project and that he needed to do something pronto if they wanted the game out on time. Apparently Gary thought the game was on track and had been told everything was fine by someone whose job it was to oversee the project. Simon was asked to wait in Gary's office while he went over to the Princess Street offices to see if what he been told was true. Once Gary had seen the state of things, which probably took a grand total of eight minutes, then the whole Active Minds side of things was shut down immediately and *'Total Recall'* was totally brought in-house at Ocean. Active Minds were never heard of again.

I found out years later, and I was unaware of this at the time, that the original 'working at home' ZX Spectrum programmer had been as good as held hostage at Ocean HQ until he handed in a finished game. Once it became apparent that were really flogging a dead horse and they'd still be waiting for it to this very day had they stuck to that plan, he was given the boot once and for all. The few staff from Active Minds who'd pulled their weight – me, Simon, Fred O'Rourke and Mark K. Jones were then informed that we were now working with the rest of the Ocean in-house staff team in the cellars of Central Street and we all had to work our bollocks off to get a finished game done in time for Christmas. Everything produced at Active Minds was scrapped and the whole project was started again, for the third and final time. The only graphic work of mine that survived from the Active Minds Spectrum version of the game was the loading screen. It says much about the project that I drew the loading screen near the very start of the project – with all my other Spectrum titles that had been the very last thing to do. I'd drawn and animated the main sprite, a few baddies, some objects and one map. None of my in-game graphics were now usable because originally the game was going to use a monochrome scroll like the one used in *'Gryzor'*. This new version was going to use a colour scroll and, as such, rendered my map unusable. A Spectrum game can't have much colour in a pixel scroll as you have to disguise where the character boundaries lie with the use of black space either side because of the Spectrum's colour limitations. With a character scroll that wasn't necessary as you're moving a whole block of eight by eight pixels, and its two colour values, in one go.

It was now early November. Christmas day was seven weeks away, and my two days a week in Manchester were now being spent back where I used to work two years earlier, in the dungeons at Ocean. The new 8-bit versions of *'Total Recall'* were then coded, in a great hurry, by seasoned in-house staff and I wasn't required to do any work for those. I was now working on the Amiga and ST versions, along with Mark K. Jones who, if I recall correctly, had moved back to Manchester temporarily at the request of Ocean to help get the game done as quickly as possible. Ocean were putting him up in a hotel for the duration of the project, desperate times called for desperate measures! I was tasked with creating graphics for the two car chase sections in the Amiga and Atari ST games – one was set in a city and the other on Mars. I drew the background graphics, multiple cars which were then animated exploding and various pick-ups. Now though progress was clearly being made and each week, when I ventured up to Ocean, I could see the progress that had been made compared to the week before. On Tuesday 6 November 1990 I was paid my monthly Active Minds wage via Ocean, the sum of £675, and had to sign a letter to say I understood that:

"Active Minds' remain your employer and accordingly is still responsible for both tax and National Insurance due'.

So what's the betting that was never paid then? Meanwhile, everyone beavered on through the whole of November getting the game ready and as the final deadline approached it looked like we all might be able to actually pull it off. I'm sure that the many people involved in writing this major blockbuster Christmas release all worked harder than they'd ever done before! I can't say I felt any great pressure though as I was really enjoying it and loved being back in the familiar busy hustle of things again. I was working back with all my old work mates and hadn't needed to move back up to Manchester in order to do so. I was well known for working fast and got everything done that was required of me in the very small time frame we had. A couple of people had left since I was an in-

house member of staff and there were a few new faces now employed - like programmer Bobby Earl, artist Brian Flanagan and a new games tester called Andy Routledge, all who I got on with and got to know during my month or so there. On Thursday 6 December 1990 I received another monthly wage from Ocean of £675 and I had to sign the same legal document that stated that Active Minds was still my employer.

A ten minute film exists from one of my trips up to Ocean during December that shows me, Stephen Thomson and Bill Harbison clowning around in John Palmer's Salford flat one night. John had obviously offered (or drew the short straw?) to put me up for the evening and Bill and Steve had tagged along too for the hell of it. In it me, Steve and Bill mess about with crude stop motion animation and weird video effects. Bill does a mock interview with me where I talk about my (non-existent) latest directorial film release *'The Shelf Stacker'* while holding an old trainer. I spout all sort of nonsense and look like I'm off my head on something but I can assure you that the strongest substance taken by me that night was probably a glass of Ribena. John filmed the craziness but he stayed strictly behind the camera for the duration as he was a tad shy and would shriek and hide whenever we tried to film him instead of us. You can see that video here - Part 1: <https://youtu.be/PAXKakK0Xto> and Part 2: <https://youtu.be/uau1gF1NQUI>

During another *'Total Recall'*-era stay, this time at Dawn Drake's house, we all had our palms read, which was recorded onto tape for us to take away with us. During my reading I was told by the palm reader that she had never seen so much success and money in a reading. This success would come via America. Hmmm! I'm still waiting, you'll not be surprised to find out, for that to come true!

Meanwhile in Spain, *'Micro Hobby'* magazine managed to review the totally unplayable one level Spectrum demo of the Active Minds version of *'Total Recall'* in issue 204 from November 1990. The barely run-able version of the game was given a double page spread and an overall mark of 75%. How anyone came to that conclusion is beyond me because you couldn't actually do anything in it as there was no actual game there to play, let alone review! Crazy!

During this last week the final touches were made to all the various versions of *'Total Recall'* and, much to everyone's relief, the game actually went out just in time for the Christmas market. *'Total Recall'* even garnered some really good reviews in the magazines that soon followed. Later, on 20 December 1990, I received a most welcome £300 bonus for the work I did on *'Total Recall'*. I had never received a bonus at Ocean before. That Thursday evening at some time just after 4:40pm I left the dungeons of 6 Central Street for, what turned out to be, the very last time for many years. I walked up to Piccadilly Station and got the train home to Northampton.

After all of that I didn't really know what to do with myself. Christmas came and went and I just floundered about a bit. I would have liked, perhaps, to have carried on working at Ocean using the arrangement that had just been proven to work with me working there two days a week. I can't remember what happened. I don't know if I actually asked and was told "no" or if I was half hoping to be phoned up and asked. In any case, neither transpired. Whatever did happen or didn't, that £300 was the last time I ever received any money from Ocean Software. I would never do any paid work for them ever again.

Around Christmas time I bought myself (probably with some of my Ocean bonus money) my first Nintendo console, a Game Boy. The handheld, cartridge based console was launched in the UK on 28 September and had been doing tremendously well sales-wise all over the world. I'd managed to have a play with one while working at Ocean and had decided I really wanted one of my own. The only place I could find that had the machine and games in stock was Toys "R" Us who were selling it at £69.99. Northants Computer Centre had decided not to stock it due to the low profit margin which marked the first time that a new games machine wasn't available from them. Along with the packaged copy of *'Tetris'* I bought my first ever Mario game with it, *'Super Mario Land'*. I found both games maddeningly addictive, though I still haven't managed to complete the latter game without cheating. My mum also became moderately addicted to *'Tetris'* and it was the only game ever where we would both try and beat each other's scores. Mum told me that if she played *'Tetris'* before going to bed all she could see was falling blocks when she closed her eyes to try and go to sleep! After a while though anyone else in the house had to insist on the game being played with the volume down as the default music, a version of a Russian folk tune called *'Korobeiniki'*, was so catchy that if the sound was up for any length of time we'd all have the tune stuck in our heads for hours, if not days, after and we'd be walking round the house whistling it involuntarily. This would result in everyone being doubly annoyed at hearing it all over again!

While I did use my Game Boy quite a lot to start with the novelty of it soon wore off. I didn't really like the fact that I had to be sat near a plug hole to play on it (I didn't have much money for the constant changing of batteries if I had been using it while unplugged from the mains!) and the black and white screen display wasn't all that clear. Some companies released back-light add-ons to improve the clarity of the screen display but I wasn't enamored with it enough to ever get one of those. One of the Game Boy's selling points was that it was fully portable but I never got into taking it out and about with me. Using it outdoors in the sun made the graphics even harder to see because of the glare. You couldn't get copies of games for it either as they all came on cartridges. That made copying games impossible for the likes of me, unlike games for the ZX Spectrum and Amiga, but it also made me use the console less than if I had been able to. I only ended up buying two extra games for it in the end, the aforementioned '*Super Mario Land*' and '*Gargoyle's Quest*' (in 1991). So that was a grand total of three games I had to play.

The Game Boy and its improved colour follow up, the Game Boy Color, went on to sell 118.69 million units worldwide, with 32.47 million units sold in Japan, 44.06 million in the Americas, and 42.16 million in other regions. I kept mine for a couple of years then flogged it at a car boot sale in the early 90s. Obviously I wished I'd kept my Game Boy and games as the two extra titles I'd bought were still complete with their boxes, all the instructions and were in mint condition. Idiot!

Commodore Amiga software owned in 1990:

(Listed alphabetically: Title, developer/label)

1. '**Dragon's Breath**' by Outlaw/Palace.
2. '**Dragon's Lair: Escape from Singe's Castle**' by Visionary Design/ReadySoft Inc.
3. '**Escape from the Planet of the Robot Monsters**' by Teque Software/Domark.
4. '**Flood**' by Bullfrog/Electronic Arts.
5. '**Ghostbusters II**' by Fours Field/Activision.
6. '**The Immortal**' by Will Harvey/Electronic Arts.
7. '**James Pond: Underwater Agent**' by Vector Dean/Millennium.
8. '**Knights of the Crystallion**' by Bill Williams/U.S.Gold.
9. '**Powermonger**' by Bullfrog/Electronic Arts.
10. '**Prince of Persia**' by Broderbund/Domark.
11. '**Saint Dragon**' by Random Access/The Sales Curve.
12. '**Turrican**' by Factor 5/Rainbow Arts.

Original Game Boy cartridges owned/bought in 1990:

(Title, developer, UK release date)

1. '**Tetris**' by Bullet-Proof Software, 28 September 1990.
2. '**Super Mario Land**' by Nintendo R&D1, 28 September 1990.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1990:

Terry Thomas – 8 January.

Jim Henson – 16 May.

Roald Dahl – 23 November.

Chapter 15: Ocean Software Staff list 1987 – 1990.

The following is an alphabetical list of everyone *I can remember* who was part of the team at Ocean during the period I was working there. This list is not definitive as, during 1990, I only worked there two days a week so have not included staff who may have worked there during that time period that I did not get to know as I have no memory of them. Their job titles are based on what machines I remember them working on *at that time*. The ladies are represented by the surnames they had *at the time*:

Downstairs staff:

Bill Barna – Commodore 64 programmer.

Gari Biasillo – Musician.

David Blake – Trainee Commodore 64 programmer.

Gary Bracey – Software Development Manager.

John 'Elmer' Brandwood – Amstrad CPC programmer.

Lorraine Broxton – Gary Bracey's assistant.

Simon Butler – Commodore 64 artist.

Matthew Cannon – Musician.

Peter Clarke – Musician.

Dave Collier – Commodore 64 programmer.

Lee 'Hong Kong' Cowley – Ocean's first games tester. Lee play tested the new titles as they were being written and dealt with faulty tapes/disks that had been returned to the non-existent 'Mr Yates'.

Andrew Deakin – ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC programmer.

Dawn Drake – ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC artist.

Darren Dunn – Trainee Commodore 64 programmer.

Jonathan Dunn – Musician.

Jason Dutton – Ocean's fourth games tester.

Eddie (?) – Games tester who wasn't employed for long.

Roger Fenton – Musician who lasted a tiny bit longer than Eddie but not much.

Ronnie Fowles – ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC artist.

Martin Galway – Musician.

Bill Harbison – ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC artist.

Robert Hemphill – Amstrad CPC artist.

James Higgins – Amstrad CPC and ZX Spectrum programmer.

Ivan Horn – ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC artist.

Paul Hughes – Commodore 64 programmer.

Mark K. Jones 'Senior' – Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64 artist.

Mark R. Jones 'Junior' – ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC artist.

Mike Lamb – ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC programmer.

Steve Lavache – Technical things.

Jane Lowe – Commodore 64 artist.

Martin MacDonald – Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC artist.

Rocky Ming – Ocean's third games tester.

John Meegan – Commodore 64 programmer.

Jon 'Jobbee' O'Brien – Amstrad CPC and ZX Spectrum programmer.

Paul Owens – ZX Spectrum programmer.

John Palmer – Commodore 64 artist.

Rick Palmer – Commodore 64 programmer.

Colin 'Fossil' Porch – Commodore 64 programmer.

Shaun Ridings – Trainee Commodore 64 artist.

Allan Shortt – Commodore 64 programmer.

Andy Sleigh – Commodore 64 artist.

David 'Ice' Thompson – ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC programmer.

Stephen 'Jolly' Thomson – Commodore 64 artist.

Zach Townsend – Commodore 64 programmer.

Kane 'Of Course' Valentine – Ocean's second games tester, coffee maker and shop runner.

Steve 'Star Trek' Wahid – Commodore 64 artist.

Steve 'Catweazle' Watson – ZX Spectrum programmer.

The following people had joined in-between me leaving Ocean and coming back in 1990 to work on *'Total Recall'*:

Bobby Earl – Commodore 64 and Amiga programmer.

Brian Flanagan – Commodore 64 artist.

Colin Gordon – External Software Manager.

Andy Routledge – Ocean's fifth games tester.

Upstairs staff:

Debbie Abbot, Mike Barnes, Clare Barnwell, Jenny Beattie, Steve Blower, Lynne Carter, Tracey Crook, Julia Doyle, Debbie Ellis, Jenny Gillespie, Hilary Greenwood, Pam Griffiths, Paul Finnegan, Alex Lavelle, Jayne McDermott, Simon Muchmore, Paul Patterson, Carl Pugh, Emma Rollo, Miles Rowland, Jane Smithies, Colin Stokes, David Ward and Jon Woods.

Chapter 16: 1991

“I'm desperate and need the cash!”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

'The Silence of the Lambs' – Jonathan Demme, 14 February.

'The Doors' – Oliver Stone, 1 March.

'Terminator II: Judgment Day' – James Cameron, 3 July.

'Drop Dead Fred' – Ate De Jong, 11 October.

'JFK' – Oliver Stone, 20 December.

Come the New Year I was still struggling to find much, if any, freelance computer graphic work. Various odds and ends were only coming in in dribs and drabs. I was getting a little bit fed up with this carry on. I did draw and got paid for a loading screen for an arcade game Elite were putting out on the 16-bits called *'Last Battle'*. This work was allotted to me via Nick Vincent at a company based in Prestwich, Manchester called Creative Materials (who were a re-branded Binary Design after they'd experienced some financial troubles). They'd been one of the companies I'd sent my demo discs to in order to try and find some paid work. I enjoyed putting the screen together and was pleased with the end result. It turned out that *'Last Battle'* only came out on the Commodore 64 and Amiga and, upon its release, my loading screen was nowhere to be seen. Maybe the Atari ST version had not been up to releasable quality? Still, I couldn't see why Elite didn't use my screen for the Amiga release. All of that had been a big fat waste of time but at least I'd actually been paid for it (and I still have it!)

Not long after and probably due to the fact my *'Last Battle'* screen was delivered on time I was offered a full-time Commodore Amiga and Atari ST game to produce the graphics for. It wasn't a design of mine so must have come from someone at Creative Materials. Its original working title was *'Goblins'* and, from what I remember, it would have looked a bit like the Psygnosis title *'Lemmings'* that was currently selling like hot cakes on the 16-bit machines. I don't recall many details about what the game would have consisted of but I did draw an intricately animated Goblin who stood all of eight pixels high. I completed an eight frame walk that, to my eyes, looked great and a sixteen frame jump that I was even more pleased with. Within the eight pixels I had managed to convey the Goblin's ears and nose bouncing up and down as he jumped across the screen. I also drew a dragon, a three headed ostrich type animal and a mean looking 'troll thing'. Ultimately, all of this went unused. Why you ask? I'll explain. Creative Materials were in talks with Birmingham's U.S.Gold via Tony Porter, who was their Software Development Manager, to release the finished *'Goblins'* game. The company were keen to move away from the Amiga and Atari ST machines and start producing games for the burgeoning Sega Megadrive market. This would have required a completely different look from the tiny *'Lemmings'* type graphics to bigger, cartoony, more *'Sonic the Hedgehog'* type graphics. After Nick came to visit me in Northampton to discuss the game I got to work and drew on to paper designs for two main characters, a good one and an evil one, who were named, not by me I hasten to add, Desmond Dingbatt and his evil cousin Ralph (I mean, really?!) Various animals who would inhabit the play area were also drawn. These were then faxed off to Creative Materials who then composed a fax to U.S.Gold that included my drawings. It's a good job that I have now transcribed the contents of the fax that follows. Had I left it any longer then it would have soon been completely unreadable as it has nearly faded away completely faded due to its age:

Page 1:

Creative Materials Ltd
FACSIMILE COVER SHEET

NAME:- Mark Jones
COMPANY:- to be collected
FROM:- Nick
DATE:- 15-05-91

We are transmitting a total of 6 pages including this sheet. If you do not receive all of the pages please phone 061 773 8511

Message:

Dear Mark,

Here is the preliminary docs I sent to U.S.Gold. Something I forgot to mention when we met was the natural hazards like volcanoes, rivers, underground caves, lightning etc. which I'd still like to carry over into this new version.

Any ideas for character names?

I want to do some more work on the player characters. Their heads should be bigger in relation to their body. How about a mining helmet?

Ideas on colour? Keep it bright,

Regards,
Nick.

CREATIVE MATERIALS LIMITED
28 Church Lane
Prestwich
Manchester M25 5 AJ
Tel: 061-773 8511
Fax: 061-773 6151
Directors: A. Hieke, P. Dempsey, N. Vincent

Page 2:

Attn: Tony Porter
Software Development Manager
U.S.Gold Ltd,
2-3, Holford Way
Holford
Birmingham
B6 7AX

14th May 1991

Dear Tony,

Andy tells me he had some discussions with you regarding our "Goblins" idea when he was visiting you, and that, in view of the changing marketplace, you wanted us to take another look at the design, with a view to putting it on the Genesis.

Apologies for the delay in getting back to you but, you know, consoles are a new thing for us, and we wanted to spend some time playing games on them, in order to get into the groove. We've played all the stuff you kindly loaned us (although I'm not sure the word "played" is the right term to use for "Afterburner"!). Andy has persuaded Red Rat to loan us any cartridges from their shop that we fancy taking a look at, so we've been able to see quite a good selection of Sega stuff now.

What follows is an outline – just one idea that we've developed. If you like it, and feel we've got far enough away from "Lemmings", we'll do a full, detailed game play design.

Apparently you had the idea of including other creatures in the game, and I was thinking of something like that myself as well so we thought that maybe that was the right line to pursue. The result is really quite different from the original idea. Also, it could not, honestly be described as a

“Lemmings” rip-off. One thing I'm not sure about now is where your zoom-in idea fits, gameplay-wise, on the console versions. I think it's a nice effect, but the impact it would have on cartridge memory would have to be justified by some real contribution to gameplay. One to think about later on, perhaps.

Look forward to hearing your thoughts on this.

Best regards,

Nick Vincent - Development Manager.

Page 3:

GOBLINS: GAME OUTLINE FOR SEGA CONSOLES

Original design:

This was for the 16-bit PC formats. Player controlled a community of small creatures (“Goblins”) via mouse pointer and directed their activities in mining and other activities. Aim was to grow and develop the community, dealing with incidental hazards such as underground monsters and volcanoes. In dual mode, two players could each control separate communities, and play competitively. As there were to be a very large number of goblins, their size was quite small – only 8 pixels high.

Problems for console development:

Hard to get involved with such small characters. Too much of the God simulator element for console market. No on-screen player character to identify with. Game not designed to test dexterity and pattern-learning skills in the same way as typical successful console games. Looked too similar to “Lemmings”.

Changes to design:

Closer viewpoint so we can have larger sprites. Instead of just one species of creature, use lots of different ones, each type doing one particular job. Introduce player characters on screen. Keep the competitive element of two-player mode, but instead of the players directing rival communities, have them play different characters. (Faxed page included the drawings of the two characters, Desmond and Ralph.)

Page 4:

Player Characters:

When there is a single person playing, or for player one in dual player mode, he plays the part of Desmond Dingbatt. (Please understand the names to be provisional only). Desmond is mister nice guy, is friends with all the animals, and runs around organising and helping everyone. Player two is Desmond's alter ego, evil cousin Ralph, who lives only to sabotage Desmond's plans. He sticks corks up the elephant's trunks, sets the rabbits to undermining Desmond's tunnels, stops the mole hills with rocks, lures the monkey's away with bananas and drills holes in the beaver dams.

Non Player Characters: Workers.

Animal characters that work with Desmond...

Pelican, Monkey, Elephant, Beaver, Mole. (Faxed page included the drawings of these animals.)

Page 5:

Non Player Characters: Opponents.

Animals whose activity obstructs or opposes the workers...

Rabbit, Eagle, Squirrel. (Faxed page included the drawings of these animals.)

Non Player Characters: Distractors.

Diverts the attention of the workers, or that of the player...

Fish, Stork. (Faxed page included the drawings of these animals.)

Page 6:

Game Play and Objectives:

Animals follow Desmond and, when guided to the vicinity of their task, begin to carry it out single mindedly. Desmond's job is to direct work and to keep the animals fed and watered and away from trouble and, if necessary, supplied with materials. For instance, beavers cut down trees to be used for building and for pit props and for their dams. Pelicans carry water from the beaver lakes for the other animals. Monkeys swing around in gibbon-like fashion doing the construction jobs. The elephants are very useful animals; they can carry trees to the monkeys to build with or put up props, they can carry water for the other animals, or put out fires (with their trunks). They can charge the trees to shake out those pesky squirrels, which love to pelt the hard-working beavers with their nuts. If animals get hungry they will wander off from their work to find their own food.

All the time, the opponent creatures are causing trouble, which will be worse if Cousin Ralph is around. The rabbits undermine the mole tunnels and drain away water from the dams. Eagles drop rocks to close off the openings into the diggings. Squirrels pelt anything that comes under their trees with nuts. Other creatures get in the way. Fish may breed in one of the beaver dams, then the pelicans will spend time diving after the fish, rather than carrying water. Little bitty woodworm will attack pit props and collapse tunnels. There are two types of stork which the players will learn to recognise. One brings helpful creatures, and one brings opponents and distractors.

Desmond and Ralph live only to gain points at each other's expense. Desmond wants to dig up various items in the ground (gold nuggets, truffles) and to collect fruit from trees above ground. Ralph gets points for collapsing tunnels, draining dams and other mischief.

There are other distractions. It would no longer be suitable to have fire breathing dragons in caves in the ground, but we can include underground rivers, volcanoes, snakes and maybe the odd flash of lightning.

With the game on I was really strapped for cash so I readily agreed to cover for two weeks staff holiday at Serv-U Computers, during which we were visited by 'Games-X' magazine who featured the shop in their 'Street Talk' section in the 31 May – 6 June edition. For this section of their magazine they would talk to customers and staff in computer game shops and ask them what titles they'd been buying and playing. I was interviewed, along with Lee Hunter who was now the Software Manager, for the article:

"Mark Jones (20)

Actually I work here! Well, only for two weeks. I'm on holiday at the moment and Lee asked me to help out. I'm a freelance graphic designer, and I have worked for Ocean in the past. At the moment I am doing the graphics for a Megadrive game, but I can't say any more about it. I own a few systems. I've got an Amiga, ST and Spectrum, and I've just bought 'Eye of the Beholder' and 'Chuck Rock' on the Amiga. If I get a bit of free time I usually pop out to the flicks or play my guitar."

I like how I said, "I'm on holiday at the moment" rather than the truth which would have been, "I can't get much computer graphic work at the moment so I'm working here because I'm desperate and need the cash!"

"Lee Hunter – Shop Manager

I've been working here since it opened about 18 months ago now. The owner is away on holiday, so I'm in charge for two weeks. Saturday is the busiest time for us, we have to double the staff because of the rush. We might be expanding, this means getting a bigger shop, which is really needed now, as we're really stuck for space. The software which is really selling is role-playing games, which I can see becoming more popular. At the moment we're thinking about getting the CDTV. We feel you have to move with the times."

The shop's current best sellers were then listed:

01. ***Eye of the Beholder***
02. ***HeroQuest***
03. ***Gods***
04. ***Chuck Rock***
05. ***Monkey Island***
06. ***Armour-Geddon***
07. ***Wonderland***
08. ***PGA Tour Golf***
09. ***American Football***
10. ***Mickey Mouse***

And that was it regarding Creative Materials and '*Goblins*' or whatever it was now called. Not long after this the game was canned. I can't even recall what the game was then titled as it had completely lost any need to have any goblins in it. I did no work on the newer, console appropriate graphics and the reason for the sudden cancellation is lost to the mists of time. I'd spent a good few weeks working on the design and it all came to nothing, game-wise or wage-wise! I was getting desperate now and needed to earn myself a regular wage as my bank balance was non-existent. I had really enjoyed my two weeks back in the shop so, a few days after, I had a word with Karl, who was still the owner, and he agreed take me back on a full-time and permanent basis. I would continue to try and get freelance computer graphic work but it had to be on a part-time basis. Trying to do it full-time just hadn't worked out. I would work at the shop and fit in any graphic work, should any come along, in my evenings and days off.

At Serv-U Computers Rodney, my old mate from the Leisuresoft days, was our telesales contact so I would speak to him on the phone at least twice every day. By this time Rodders was now well into his second year of working there. So even though we hadn't become really close friends, we still kept up the chit chat via the phone calls and carried on our friendship that way. I saw him out and about a couple of times and we'd say "Hi" and exchange a few pleasantries then carry on our merry way. He was a trendy chap, always looked smart and had a good head of curly, gelled hair on him. One Thursday, while on my lunch break from the computer shop, I was in the Grosvenor Centre in Northampton and I was going up the escalator and I saw Rodders on the other escalator going down. We shouted "Hello!" and acknowledged each other but didn't chat as we were going in opposite directions and separated by a space of fifteen or so feet. I'd just got rid of my old fashioned eighties glasses and had started wearing contact lenses. I'd also changed my hair from having a side parting to brushing it forward and grew some sideburns. This was during the start of the whole '*Madchester*' era so music, clothes and hairstyles were changing.

I was also getting into some new music for once and had just bought the Stone Roses, The La's, The Charlatans and The Real People's debut albums (three of the albums were named after the band featured – The Stone Roses album came out on 2 May 1989, The La's album on the 1 October 1990, The Charlatans '*Some Friendly*', on 8 October 1990 and The Real People on 6 May 1991). Blur's debut album '*Leisure*' was about to be released (on 26 August 1991) as well as, a few weeks later, Primal Scream's '*Screamadelica*' (on 23 September 1991). That last album was to really open my head up to a different type of music and helped me bridge the gap between music from the late 1960s and modern music. I had it on constantly, at home and in the car while driving about, and it became a defining album for me. There was another new band called Five Thirty who had released their debut album called '*Bed*' (rel. 19 August 1991) who I was a big fan of and Saint Etienne's first album, titled '*Foxbase Alpha*' (rel. 16 September 1991) earned itself repeat plays on my stereo. It was a fantastic time to be getting into new bands and marked the first time ever that I got into a current 'scene' (though I didn't end up going the whole hog and partaking in going to raves and taking drugs like Ecstasy). I was starting to wear things like red Levi's, flared jeans, baggy t-shirts and I had bought a really psychedelic shirt from Topman that looked like something The Beatles would have worn in their '*Magical Mystery Tour*' film. The shirt is still in service today, albeit for special occasions and when I'm feeling particularly daring! (Though it does look like

someone's vomited on me when I do wear it!) So I was looking a bit different from when I'd been working at the software distributors. Rodney had also just had a neat haircut and, upon seeing him on the escalator, I noticed it and thought it looked better than how he used to have it.

On the phone later that day at work Rodney rang up around four in the afternoon as usual and commented that he liked my new haircut. I returned the compliment and said "Nah, yours looks better" and this went back and forth a few times until we got down to the reason for his call and he took down the details of the stock I needed to order for the next day and that was that. I didn't speak to him again on the Friday. Rodney was going away for the weekend and needed the Friday off so he could travel to where he was going in time for whatever he'd got planned for the day after.

That Saturday night on the 30 June, Rodney was involved in a car crash. He was driving with a friend up around Lincolnshire and something had gone terribly wrong. Rodney's injuries were so severe he didn't survive the accident. He was only 18. He was the first person I ever knew that died. It was horrible. I have no recollection of being told of Rodney's death. Further experience has told me that my brain makes me forget traumatic events over time and, try as I might, I cannot remember how I found out what had happened. But I can guess. I would have gone to work as normal on the Monday morning to the computer shop. Rodney always made two calls to the shop. One in the morning and one last thing to see what, if anything, I needed to order. I would have got the call from Leisuresoft around nine thirty to ten o'clock in the morning expecting to hear Rodney's voice on the end of it. I would have said something like "Oh where's Rodders today then?" Then I would have been told the dreadful news by whoever was on the other end of the phone. The person who told me would have been one of Rodney's work mates who had not long arrived at their place of work to be told what they'd just passed on to me. I don't dare think how horrible it would have been that morning for Rodney's boss to have to divide up his accounts to the rest of the telesales team as they would have all still needed calling and their orders taken that day. Every call would have necessitated telling the software buyer on the other end why they weren't talking to Rodders as per usual. After all, life goes on doesn't it?

I went to Rodney's funeral which took place less than a week later. It was the first one I'd ever been to. I held it together right till the end, then a song was played that had just been in the charts at the time. It was '*All Together Now*' by The Farm. That was the point I lost it. Ever since that day, whenever I hear that song I immediately think of him. As the service ended and we filed out of the church I remember I kept saying to someone "I only spoke to him on Thursday". I still couldn't believe that he was dead. Twenty nine years later, I can still hear Rodney's voice in my head. That's probably because I spoke to him so much on the phone. Sadly I can't see his face any more. I just haven't retained an image of it. Though I'm certain that, should I ever see a photo of him, I would instantly recognise him. In 2021 a relative of his saw a post I had made about him on a Facebook group a couple of years before and, after a few messages to and fro, sent me 3 photos of him. There he was again and I recognised him straight away!

Just seven days later, on the following Saturday after Rodney's death, there was more tragedy as Katie, another young girl who worked at Leisuresoft doing the same job as me, Conrad and Rodney was involved in another car crash and was also killed. Katie had been in a car with her boyfriend, who was another member of the telesales team. He, though badly hurt, survived the collision. It was a really horrible time; this was just too much for us to all deal with. As the old saying goes "Bad things come in threes" and we wondered what on earth was going to hit us all next.

Original Game Boy cartridges bought in 1991:

(Title, developer, UK release date)

1. '**Gargoyle's Quest**' by Capcom, mid-1991.

Commodore Amiga software owned in 1991:

(Listed alphabetically: Title, developer/label)

1. '**Chuck Rock**' by Core Design Limited.
2. '**Eye of the Beholder**' by Westwood Associates/Strategic Simulations Inc.

3. **'Heimdall'** by The 8th Day/Core Design Limited.
4. **'Lemmings'** by DMA Design/Psygnosis.
5. **'SWIV'** by Random Access/The Sales Curve.
6. **'Turrigan II: The Final Fight'** by Factor 5/Rainbow Arts.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1991:

Freddie Mercury – 24 November.
Roger Tissyman (Software Projects cover artist) – date unknown.
Tim Hartnell (Computer book author) – date unknown.

Chapter 17: 1992

“..he's got the 'Flood II' job from Bullfrog!”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

'Basic Instinct' – Paul Verhoeven, 8 May.

'Alien 3' – David Fincher, 22 May.

'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me' – David Lynch, 28 August.

'Reservoir Dogs' – Quentin Tarantino, 23 October.

After the Christmas and New Year celebrations had finished things actually started to look up work-wise. I managed to secure some more work via Joe Bonar at Probe Software and did some computer graphics for 'Alien 3' and 'Back to the Future 3' for various 16-bit machines. The graphics I produced were drawn on my Amiga then ported across to various computers and consoles. It wasn't much really. I know I drew some pick-ups and icons for 'Alien 3' as I still retain copies of them. Looking at videos of the game running on the Amiga, Atari ST, Megadrive or SNES I can't see that they were actually used in the end. They are nowhere to be seen. I had a bit more luck with my work on 'Back to the Future 3'. I drew a graphic of the DeLorean car, shown surrounded in bolts of electricity, that's displayed when the player completes the game. I think that might have been the grand sum of my contribution. If I did draw anything else I've forgotten what it was. I only realised nearly thirty years later, when I got my first chance to load the games up on a real Sega Master System and Megadrive, that I received a mention for my work. In the on-screen credits for the game, displayed at the very start of the game, my name pops up:

“GRAPHICS BY MARK (NORTHAMPTON) JONES”

I thought it odd that my credit was worded like that. Why did they have to mention the town I was from? I certainly wouldn't have asked them to. An 'R.' in the middle, to differentiate me from the other Mark Joneses who working as computer graphic artists, would have sufficed.

After that damp squib I heard from ex-Ocean Software coder Paul Hughes who had just set up his own software company. Based in his own home he had called it Insight Software and was after a graphic partner. That person, for this period of time, turned out to be me. In a letter he sent to me dated 19 January Paul mentions that he had spent the last few months writing '*serious medical software*' and had really had enough of all that now and was looking in to getting back in to writing games again. He had already been talking to a company called Bullfrog, famous for the massive hit '*Populous*', about possibly producing a follow up to their successful Amiga and Atari ST game '*Flood*'. We'd put a loose design together and Paul sent it off with neither of us really thinking anything would come of it. They themselves were currently "*tied up for a few months organising their own in-house label*" but it was an idea they were definitely interested in pursuing. Paul suggested that maybe, in the meantime, we could knock up a budget game for the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST that would get us back into the swing of things and earn ourselves a couple of grand so a few ideas were thrown around. I had lying about some re-done and unused ZX Spectrum '*Caspar the Ironlord*' graphics on the Atari ST. I'd added colour and some more animation to my creations and Paul, in all of six hours, produced a rolling demo of it that looked pretty good. It was supposed to be a more arcadey '*Tir Na Nog*' type game, with more fighting baddies and less working out obtuse puzzles. '*Maxwell the Magic Knight*' was another game idea I had floating about and sent Paul the graphics I had thus far produced, which included a background map, some objects to pick up and a few static characters.

We finally settled on making a follow up to a ZX Spectrum classic we had both loved back in the day, '*Starquake*', written by Steve Crow and released in 1985 by Bubble Bus Software. We both felt we could try and improve on the original given our previous experience, a love for platform games and the improved capabilities that the 16-bit machines offered. At the start of February we commenced work on the game. Paul was also still touting for other work, just in case things didn't work out, and had written to Thalamus Software. In his communication to them he had collated the marks from reviews of all the games we both had worked on in the past and this averaged out at 88%. '*Mag Max*' and '*Total Recall*' had reviewed the least favourably out of all the titles we'd been

involved with and they were to blame for dropping us under the 90% bracket! One of the many ideas we had was to nick as many character names as possible from old Spectrum games and use them in a huge high-score table. I got my thinking cap on and managed to put together a list of 102 names to use.

**List of vintage game characters that were to be included in the
'Starquake II' high score table**

(You can see this running here: <https://youtu.be/ELReqkGDwcs?t=345>)

(Can you name which games they are all from? If you get stuck answers are on page 247)

- | | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| 01. Eldritch | 35. Max | 69. Zippy |
| 02. Bounty Bob | 36. Gandalf | 70. Dandy |
| 03. Willy | 37. Bilbo | 71. Rasputin |
| 04. Fred | 38. Pedro | 72. Bub |
| 05. Wally | 39. Monty Mole | 73. Bob |
| 06. Bugaboo | 40. Percy | 74. Roland |
| 07. Jetman | 41. Cúchulainn | 75. Kevin |
| 08. Sabreman | 42. Sweevo | 76. Bobby |
| 09. Robbie | 43. Ted | 77. Rockford |
| 10. Charlie | 44. Beaky | 78. Gulpman |
| 11. Blagger | 45. Kanga | 79. Pi-Man |
| 12. Ziggy | 46. Jack | 80. Zoot |
| 13. Horace | 47. Charlemagne | 81. N.O.M.A.D |
| 14. B.C. | 48. Chuckie | 82. Wartoad |
| 15. Wilf | 49. B.C.Bill | 83. Zub |
| 16. Quasi | 50. Dan | 84. Starman Jones |
| 17. Gilligan | 51. Head | 85. Mr Weems |
| 18. Martha | 52. Heels | 86. Flunky |
| 19. Mugsy | 53. Lazy Jones | 87. Mervyn |
| 20. Sir Lancelot | 54. Fat Worm | 88. Hasrinaxx |
| 21. Trashman | 55. Isvar | 89. Kong |
| 22. Jasper | 56. Maroc | 90. Odin |
| 23. Luxor | 57. Morag Shapeshifter | 91. Loki |
| 24. Morkin | 58. Wiggler | 92. Mary |
| 25. Doomdark | 59. Mrs Mopp | 93. Meena |
| 26. Zark | 60. Boni | 94. Genghis |
| 27. Sevrina | 61. Berk | 95. Haberdaber |
| 28. Syilk | 62. Drutt | 96. Eddie |
| 29. Torik | 63. Mat | 97. Pogo |
| 30. Maul | 64. Bogul | 98. Scooby |
| 31. B.L.O.B | 65. Gumphrey | 99. Shaggy |
| 32. Zirky | 66. Bounder | 100. Dr. Jones |
| 33. Sir Galaheart | 67. Sam Stoa | 101. Maria |
| 34. Wizball | 68. Brian Skywalker | 102. Orestes |

All of this then came to a grinding halt when, at the end of April a reply came back from Les Edgar at Bullfrog where he gave us the green light to go full steam ahead with '*Flood II*'. Our '*Starquake II*' was quickly forgotten about and we both put our full concentration into this new and exciting project.

Chapter 18: 1992 'Flood II' Diary entries:

Wednesday 29 April:

"Paul Hughes phoned up about 1:00 and said it looks like he's got the 'Flood II' job from Bullfrog! If so, that means I'll be doing the graphics. It would be brilliant if anything came of this. Bullfrog are the Ultimate of today and it would give me something to do and money up to September. Still, I won't get too excited yet in case nothing come of it. Fingers crossed!!"

Thursday 30 April:

"Played 'Flood I' on the Amiga just in case I do the second one!!"

Wednesday 6 May:

"Got Paul's game design for 'Flood II' today. It's good!! Started to draw some monsters and stuff for it."

Today was the day that I commenced work on the main games design. I started off by filling eight pages of A4 paper with rough drawings. I wanted to make all my mistakes before I started on the actual design document that would get shown to the folks at Bullfrog.

Thursday 7 May:

"Carried on drawing."

Saturday 9 May:

"Did some drawings for 'Flood II'. Didn't do anything else during the day except clean out the hamsters."

By the end of the day I had finished the first four pages of the games design. Page one outlined the main objective of the game and the following three pages showed what each of the thirty three inhabitants of planet Pourous looked like.

Tuesday 12 May:

"Paul H. rang up, he'd spoke to Les Edgar at Bullfrog at last and he wants me to go down and see 'em because I live the nearest! Shit! Like, Bullfrog are, I consider, one of the best in the country and they want to see me! I'm going to be shitting myself! I've got to go down next Tuesday. They're in Guildford, Surrey and I've got to be there by 1:00. God, I hope this week goes slow!"

Wednesday 13 May:

"Did some rough drawings for 'Flood II' objects."

At the end of the week a refined version of the game scenario arrived from Paul on four pages of A4. Dated 14 May it went as follows:

'Flood II, The Scenario'

After the rather untimely demise of Quiffy in our first adventure, it was discovered that somewhere in a far parallel universe Quiffy had a twin (if not more portly brother). Quiffy's brother was something of a legend in this parallel universe for his ongoing struggle to protect the planets of the Quark solar system from the clutches of the evil Professor KreamCracker.

In this, the second Flood adventure our hero has been called in to save the inhabitants of the somewhat cavernous planet of Pourous 7 from the mad professor. All was well upon the planet, the inhabitants, the Blobletts lead a simple existence pottering around the planet mining for Ore, eating, drinking and sleeping (but mostly sleeping). Yes, this was a pretty tranquil place. That was until Professor KreamCracker decided to send his minions to the planet in an attempt to use the planet as a giant water storage vessel. One by one his minions began to flood the cavernous underground lands of Pourous 7, capturing any Blobletts that got in their way. Not surprisingly the peace loving Blobletts were none too amused in having their planet turned into an oversized hot water bottle, and called upon Quiffy's (thus far unnamed!) brother to help them drain out the lands of Pourous 7, and rid them of Professor KreamCracker and his minions.

In an attempt to help our hero in his quest, the Blobletts have scattered various devices around the

caverns for him to collect, but be warned, some items may be more of a hindrance than a help in some caverns!

More specific suggestions about gameplay. (Second revision)

1. Level objective will be to “blow out” a bung on the lowest point of each level that will allow all the water to drain out à la bath plughole.
2. Each level should have several puzzle elements such as blocks that have to be pushed around the level (like the boulders in 'Boulder Dash') to trip switches that open up new parts of the cavern. Some blocks could act as temporary “bungs” that prevent the water level from rising up the cavern.
3. Around the cavern there will be specific places to drop off explosives. If Quiffy is killed at any point during the level, the place where he last planted a charge will be the restart point. There should be some on screen indication of how many charges need to be set before making a beeline for the detonator at the bottom of the level.
4. Each level is completed when Quiffy hits a detonation plunger at the bottom of the level, thus blowing up the charges that Quiffy has planted around the cavern. The giant “bath plug” at the bottom will explode with a swirly “thingummy” like water running down the plughole. During the explosion the water level will be seen to plummet down the screen as the points are being added up for Ore collected, Blobletts rescued and a time bonus. When the scores have completed adding Quiffy is beamed up à la Star Trek to go to the next level.
5. Water level is shown via a colour 15 (or 31) raster split with a “wave” effect masked above it for good measure. Thus all the palette will be switched below the split for more “watery colours”. Quiffy will still be able to run and jump (as opposed to swimming) underwater but his speed will be effected. A nice effect would be little air bubbles floating to the surface from Quiffy's mouth. Underwater there should be spouts belching out large air bubbles so that Quiffy can replenish his air supply.
6. Quiffy's twin brother will (probably) be in 8 colours to save memory (he will be at least twice the size of the character in the original 'Flood') to allow for more animation.
7. Quiffy can destroy most of KreamKracker's baddies by jumping on them (just like good old 'Mario Bros.'). However some will require several hits and some will be spikey and will need to be killed via one of Quiffy's collectable weapons. There will be bonus blocks that have to be jumped at from underneath to release goodies (just like Mario!)
8. Pick-ups can be diamond Ore boost (Quiffy can't be killed if he is holding any Ore. If he is hit whilst holding the Ore, the Ore is lost but he doesn't die, (ahem! Overtones of Sonic!), a protective shield that lasts for a set length of time. Boomerangs, a weapon that kills baddies in one shot, but has a delay between shots 'cos the boomerang has to come back! SquishyCycle is a bike with spikes on the front wheel that runs over baddies! Huge plasma rifle (like the big gun in 'Terminator 2') that wipes out everything in its path, but has an enormous recoil. Yo-Yo's can be used à la 'Frak!', except the Yo-Yo has a set recoil time to it (the further it is thrown, the longer it takes to come back). Plus many, many more to be thought up as the game progresses.
9. There are various methods of getting around the level. Most obviously running and jumping followed by moving platforms, swinging platforms (I just have to use a pendulum motion again), trampolines, gas cylinders that physically inflate Quiffy (Inflate-a-Quiff!) allowing him to float up to the inaccessible levels (baddies will come after him throwing darts in an attempt to pop him! Quiffy will burst like a balloon and fly randomly around the place making a raspberry noise!)
10. All baddies will have their own specific logic, from as dumb as an amoeba to highly intelligent “path seekers”. Baddies such as a plant like the Venus Fly Trap that opens and closes at random. Burrowing baddies that have something akin to a drill on their noses for digging a more direct route to Quiffy. Some baddies have weapons like rocket launchers which must be avoided or blown up, some have cannons that launch fireballs tangentially. There must be some diving piranha fish baddies 'cos every other platform game has 'em!!
11. At the end of each zone (each zone has say 3 levels to it) Quiffy confronts Professor KreamKracker in a different craft and guise. The KreamKracker confrontation will use BIG sprites in an attempt to drive the BLITTER loopy! Each confrontation will require increasing amounts of skill to defeat it, as KreamKracker's intelligence routine will improve from zone to zone.

12. There is no specific time limit to 'Flood II'. Obviously the more the cavern gets filled up the trickier it gets to solve the puzzles due to Quiffy's need to replenish his oxygen supply. As part of the end of zone routine you will receive a points bonus for how fast you cleared it.

13. On some parts of the levels there will be "raft" blocks that are activated when stood upon. These blocks will float along taking Quiffy with them. Along the route that the blocks will take there will be various hazards placed potentially to knock Quiffy off the raft.

14. On the map there will be various forms of firing weapons that have been laid by Von KreamKracker's nasties. They will be able to fire in many ways from pre-set horizontal and vertical firing, "Omni-Seeking" firing (i.e.: the weapon searching for which octant Quiffy is in, in relation to the weapons position), and line drawing bullets (bullets that set a path between the weapon and Quiffy, so that if Quiffy hangs around too long he is guaranteed to be hit).

15. There will be spikes that move up and down or from out of side walls (possibly triggered by standing on a "pressure pad" type of block à la 'Prince of Persia').

16. At certain locations there could be a row of BIG squashers (say 8 chars wide by half the screen deep) à la 'Monty Mole' that move up and down with acceleration in an attempt to flatten Quiffy. All the squashers would be out of sync with each other making the path through somewhat treacherous!

17. Going back to good old pendulum motion, there could be something akin to a buzz saw blade that swings (somewhat precariously) on a chain! (Imagine the fun with a death sequence for that!!!) There is no end to the ghastly devices that we could stick on the end of a chain, a giant spiky ball springs to mind.

18. This idea is dependent on a new sprite routine idea that I'm currently testing. Just like Sonic there could be HUGE chunks of background that can move up and down independently of the scroll to either make jumping to the next platform more hazardous, to push Quiffy up into some spikes (a jumping-time-critical puzzle), or and more importantly it could give Quiffy access to an otherwise inaccessible part of the cavern (or secret room). This idea is all experimental at the moment, but if it works (or more to the point looks right!) it could be the real "piece de la resistance" of 'Flood II', you see, on the ST with all the other sprites and game action still running the game still holds out at 25 fps and the Amiga should hold out at 50 fps! This, although a technical achievement that a games player wouldn't particularly notice, I think it would add a twist to the gameplay that thus far hasn't been achieved on any home micro, a twist that could help push 'Flood II' way ahead of any forthcoming competitors.

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Tuesday 19 May:

"Went to town with Mum in the morning. Got the 9:11 train to London. Got there about 10:30. Quickly popped to Tottenham Court Road. Went to Virgin (got 2 Syd Barrett books) + HMV (got the 1st Love LP on import). Went to Waterloo and got to Guildford at 12:37. They picked me up. Met + chatted to Les Edgar. Met some of their blokes (sorry, I'm at 'Bullfrog!') Sean Cooper's the only one whose name I know. Went for a drink. Met Peter Molyneux. All of 'em were really nice. Had a talk with him and Les. I'm still not sure what to tell 'em about college. There's no way I'm not going but I really want to do this as well! God why can't things be straight forward for once? Had a play on 'Mario Land' on the Super Nintendo, really good, massive game! Uncle Gary came at 4:45. Gave us a lift home. Really hot weather. Got home at 6:30. Did nothing! I'll ring Paul tomorrow; he's got to tell 'em about college. I'm not going to do it now after I've been up there and not said anything!"

Wednesday 20 May:

"Did some work on the mock up for Bullfrog."

Thursday 21 May:

"Had to do a mock up for Bullfrog this morning so I did that. Took dog over the park. Finished screen at about 3. Posted one off to Paul and one to Bullfrog. Paul Aspinall came round at 8ish. Got moaned at by mother for playing guitar too loud."

At the start of June a letter arrived from Paul containing some ideas for what the various baddies could do:

"29-5-92

Dear Mark,

Enclosed is some scribble about 'Flood II', my brain is melting trying to think of original ideas.

I've just ordered 'Super Hunchback', so I'll see if that triggers any brain waves!!

Pete Molyneux informed me today that the SNASM development system now cost £2,500, so I'm sat under a big gloomy cloud today, mise, mise mise!

Baddies

The worm and slug just trundle along and get in your way.

The magician could spray cards at you.

Burrowing Spuff gets you in his line of sight, his nose spins and he burrows towards you perhaps.

Mad Butterfly uses a homing algorithm gone wrong. i.e: it adds random velocities to its dx, dy values.

Ballerina Bulldog attempts to jump off Quiff's weapons, then jumps towards Quiffy doing a pirouette! Striking him with his wand. He then leaps away to attempt Quiffy's counter attack.

Tri-Doferhide potters left and right across the map until he sees you. He then speeds towards you trying to butt you. If Quiff jumps over him, he screeches to a halt, turns round and comes back at you (may require several hits) (akin to the rhino in 'Sabre Wulf')

Fat-Bat-Fang-Flap could have claws and tries to drop things on you. Alternately he could drop stuff from his mouth.

Yours miserable,

Paul"

So at this point we had 33 baddies to go in the game. More work was then done to decide once and for all what exactly each one did and didn't do. Paul then set to work and typed up a definitive list of baddies for 'Flood II':

"The World of FLOOD II

The inhabitants of Pourous 7

The inhabitants fall into two distinct categories, the placid "get in the way" type and the semi intelligent nasties who have all sorts of tricks up their collective sleeves...

1. Onion Head.

Just walks around getting in the way.

2. Sucker-Nab-Fab

Shoots spiky blobs out of the flaps on the top of his head. He pulls himself along with his suckers.

3. Dweeb

Bounce around in groups, being a general nuisance.

4. Worm

Slithers around (surprise, surprise), getting in the way.

5. Venus Quiff Trap

Don't go too near, because VQT is always hungry for portly green heroes.

6. Slug

Slithers along, just getting in the way.

7. Sucker Dweezil

Bounce around in groups, being a general nuisance.

8. Trundle

Trundles around the caverns, flicking his tail and releasing metal balls that hurtle around the screen.

9. Armoured Andorian

Marches around the caverns, jumping at Quiffy with his spiky helmet. He is a pain to kill because of his body armour. Quiffy needs one of his weapons to successfully eradicate the planet of Andorians.

10. Big Lip Weed

Get too near and it will kiss you to death with its big lips!

11. Tri-Eyed Slugapillar

Slithers around humming Shakin' Stevens to himself.

12. Snap Dragon

Breathes psychedelic fire.

13. Skank

Potters around, getting in the way and looking extremely gormless.

14. Plob

Potters around, getting in the way and looking extremely gormless.

15. Magician

Flicks or sprays playing cards at Quiffy.

16. Ladybird

Wanders around (flying occasionally).

17. Spiny Puff Thing

Flies around semi-intelligently, spitting globs at you.

18. Ugly Pig

Jumps around the map. Wo-betide him landing on you (eech!)

19. Burrowing Spuff

Burrows through the cavern towards Quiffy when Quiff is in his line of sight. Beware of his spiky nose. The burrowing could provide access to a secret cavern.

20. Nabskrank

Runs around the lands haphazardly. Its eyesight isn't too good, so watch out for being trampled on.

21. Mad Butterflies

Tiny things that hang around in squadrons of about 6-8 and have a nasty bite. They have an intelligent homing sense that is slightly warped due to their hallucinogenic digestive system.

22. Mutant Tadpole

Tries to lance you with his sabre as he's suffering from the delusion that he is the third musketeer.

23. Hairy Gemma

Has a deadly poisonous tongue. Gemma rolls around looking like a cute ball of fur with eyes then suddenly lays that tongue on you!

24. Ballerina Bulldog

Is pretty intelligent. He attempts to dodge some of Quiffy's weapons, then jumps towards you in a pirouette, striking Quiffy with his wand. He then leaps away so that he can dodge a counter attack.

25. Fat-Bat-Fang-Flap

Flies around the cavern dropping "things" from its mouth.

26. Crizzle

Jumps up and down. But don't let him land on you!

27. Botchop

Thinks he's a right hard nut and will jump at you in order to punch yer lights out!

28. Fluff

Bounces around, being a nuisance looking for the latest edition of "Woman's Own".

29. Hermit Teezle

Rolls around in his conker shell, popping out when he seizes the chance to bite you.

30. Horned Floffle

Herds stampede around trying to impale anyone who dares get in their way.

31. Bushy Bozrat

Wouldn't hurt a fly normally, but KreamKracker has given them all bad colds. This wouldn't be much of a problem except that their snot is highly toxic and will kill anyone on contact, so beware their sneezes.

32. Tri-Doferhide

Potters around the cavern until he sees you, he then speeds towards you trying to give you a nasty butt. If Quiff jumps over him, he screeches to a halt, turns around and charges back towards you for another attack.

33. Flatulent MudMum

Farts and belches its way around the planet, getting in your way because she moves so slowly.

Diary entries continued:

Wednesday 3 June:

"Got a reply from Paul with my monster descriptions all typed up...Started on some more stuff for Bullfrog. Did that all afternoon."

Thursday 4 June:

"All morning worked on stuff for 'Flood II'."

Friday 5 June:

"Int' morning did some more drawings for Bullfrog."

Sunday 7 June:

"Did some work on the mock up map for Bullfrog."

Monday 8 June:

"Started on maps again. Took eons. Had to rush the end at 12:30 'cause I had to get down to Hayden's to go down town so I could photocopy them and send 'em to Bullfrog."

Wednesday 10 June:

"Paul H. rang up and Bullfrog want us to do the game. Shit! That means contracts!!!! No!!!! I hate things like that. Still, at least I won't have to work at Kentucky/McDonalds while I'm at college."

Friday 12 June (my 22nd birthday):

"Les Edgar rang from Bullfrog to ask me if I could do some graphics over next week for 'Flood II'. Just so he's got an idea what it will look like. So, at least I've got something to do next week. I hope to do a lot!! Read on to this time next week to see how I did!"

Sunday 14 June:

"Started on 'Flood II'."

Monday 15 June:

"Did some graphics for 'Flood II'. Did the Venus Quiff Trap. Turned out quite well....At night did some work."

Tuesday 16 June:

"Got my non-disclosure agreement from Bullfrog. Did some work drawing some objects....Carried on working."

Wednesday 17 June:

"Int' morning did work. Animated Quiffy jumping, took ages....Did some other baddies."

Thursday 18 June:

"Tried to get MEE to work (couldn't get it to save), doing my head in. I wanted to start on a map this morning. Phoned Paul up, he didn't know either! Did some more animation."*

**(MEE = 'Map Editor Elite', Ocean's second in-house map editor for the Atari ST that improved on the original, 'Fudd-Ed', that had been written by John Brandwood.)*

Tuesday 23 June:

"Got disks + letters ready to send to Bullfrog + Paul with the weeks work (Fat-Bat-Fang-Flap)."

Wednesday 24 June:

"In the morning did some work on my map."

Thursday 25 June:

"Paul rang up at 1:30 (took dog out at 12:45ish). Talking about contracts + stuff. I got really worried (as I do) and nearly freaked out. (All that legal stuff freaks me out, I'm not a business man and contracts worry me). Had an awful afternoon worrying though after I'd spoke to Paul and Mum I felt better."

Thursday 6 August:

"I'm really depressed at the mo'. Everyone seems to be going away on holiday or whatever. I'm worried about the game and there's no one I can talk to."

Sunday 9 August:

"Still don't know what to do about this game. One minute I want to do it, the next I want to go to college."

Monday 10 August:

"Paul from Wigan rang. Asked me whether I still want to do the game, told him I'm not sure. Still, I fell better that he knows. At least if I say no it'll be less of a shock to him."

Tuesday 11 August:

"I reckon I'm not going to do this game now. When I think I'm doing the game I feel all nervous, when I think I'm going to college I feel okay."

Wednesday 12 August:

"Got up at 10. Paul rang up (Wigan). Said I was going to college. Felt awful...Paul rang (Wigan). We're going to try and do it so that I do the sprites only and Bullfrog do the maps. They're so impressed by my stuff that they want me and only me to do the sprites. Paul's going to suggest it to Les tomorrow."

Thursday 13 August:

"Paul rang in the morning to say that Les has agreed to the proposal. So now I'm going to college and in my spare time (at least two days a week). I'll do sprites only. At least I won't have to work in Kentucky or anything like that!"

Tuesday 18 August:

"Paul (Wigan) rang and asked to me animate a sprite."

Thursday 20 August:

"Started on the feet for my Bozrat sprite for 'Flood II'. Managed to get it looking semi-decent, walking along, tail moving, eyes blinking, bobbing up and down, snot dripping from its nose. Walked down to Post Office at 4:45. Posted it first class."

Monday 21 September:

"Got up at 10:30ish. Phoned Les at Bullfrog about this damn game. I'm not going to college any more. The work is too babyish and boring. I need some money and want to move out so I've got to get full-time work. Went Leanne's then me and Nicola went job centre. I was looking for a two day a week p/t job. I'm going to work for Bullfrog three days a week and, in case they're late paying, get a two day a week job so that I can pay my rent."

Tuesday 22 September:

"In morning phoned Les at Bullfrog. Put my mind at rest a bit. Paul reckons he can never get through to him and stuff but I had quite a good chat with him and can't wait to start. I did ring Bullfrog again because he didn't ring Paul yesterday when he said he would. Sorted out money."

Monday 5 October:

"Walked to Burtons. Had interview. Did well but they needed someone who could do extra work up till Xmas and I can't do that what with my Bullfrog job. So that's a no go then."

Wednesday 7 October:

"Did a rough schedule for 'Flood II', worked out to be about 11 months."

"FLOOD II' ROUGH SCHEDULE

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 week | = 3 days | |
| 1 sprite | = All frames for 1 sprite roughly 2 days (Mainly walking, jumping, firing + dying – not all will do all these). | |
| | 33 sprites at 1 every 2 days | = 66 days |
| | (Some may only take 1 day) | = 22 weeks |
| | | = <u>5 months</u> |
| Quiffy | = More frames than normal sprites | = 6 days |
| | | = <u>2 weeks</u> |
| Maps | = 5 maps to do (map + blocks) | |
| | 1 map roughly 9 days | = 3 weeks |
| | 5 maps would take | = 15 weeks |
| | | = <u>4 months</u> |
| Pick-ups | = Objects + weapons | = <u>1 week</u> |
| | So far | = 9 months and 3 weeks |
| Intro screens, logos + extra bits | | = <u>1 month</u> |
| | | = 10 months + 3 weeks |
| | Sprites | = 5 months |
| | Quiffy | = 2 weeks |
| | Maps | = 4 months |

Pick-ups = 1 week
Intros, logos + extras = 1 month

10 months 3 weeks

Monday 12 October:

"Paul from Wigan rang up at about 11:30 and was well pissed off. He said that he'd spoke to Les (Bullfrog) and he'd said he was losing confidence in Paul and the product. He didn't have the same buzz about it now that he did earlier on. I was just about to sign the contract and I was thinking how the fuck am I supposed to sign a contract if he thinks this? Paul was going on about it for ¼ of an hour. When I put the phone down I was almost a nervous wreck. So I rang Les up. He said what he really said in a roundabout way was that Paul was causing doubts in his head because he kept on asking for changes to the contract, they'd do them and then he'd ask for more which was wasting time. Also he said that if I hadn't heard from Paul by Friday to give him a ring (Les) and he'd see where we'd go from there. So I reckon he's saying if Paul doesn't pull his finger out then Les is going give me something to do for them and forget about Paul."

Tuesday 20 October:

"Paul H. rang to say that he and Les had a big argument on the phone and the game's off!"

Upon discovering this diary entry in preparation for this book I asked Paul if he actually remembered what the aforementioned argument was about, as I hadn't a clue. He did:

"So, there's one bit I'm racking my brain about specifically but, yeah, the gist was I had the first and second drafts of a contract from Bullfrog and was trying to get a hold of Les to go over a few issues raised by my lawyer. At the time Les was proving a hard man to get a hold of as he was out in Japan (I think) pitching stuff to the console makers. There was one sticking point outstanding - and I'm trying to remember what it was; it was an utterly trivial point for Bullfrog to concede, especially as I would've pretty much given everything but the shirt off my back to get it signed and Les had come back with, and I'll always remember this, "I'm not prepared to make any more changes to the contract". I think I pretty much lost my shit at that point (which, you know, in hindsight was a bit petulant of me), but I was used to 'dancing the dance' with contracts and would typically go through half a dozen drafts, but having put so much into the demos on two platforms and then being given the run around I was a bit honked off, especially as they were talking about switching to the Megadrive - a third platform for the same money with no first refusal or remuneration for any ports. They just blanket refused to continue the negotiation. Ironically I got to work with Les at EA (Electronic Arts) and have remained firm friends with him to this day. It'll come to me what the sticking point was, but that was the gist."

So that was that! Nearly six months of unpaid work all down the drain. It had all been for nothing! It really was a great shame because we all thought, myself, Paul and the folks at Bullfrog, that the design and the work that had been done so far was starting to look really good. Had the game gone on to completion all the ingredients were there for it to have been a corker. This was the final nail in coffin for me as by this point I'd really come to the end of my tether with computers and doing graphics for games that either barely got off the ground or ended up not ever getting finished. It was a real low point and I wondered what on earth I was going to do next job-wise. One thing I was sure of was that I really didn't want to play computer games for the foreseeable future or waste my time drawing graphics for them so my Amiga, Atari ST and my ZX Spectrum sat gathering dust on my computer desk.

I was unemployed for a good few weeks, maybe a month or so. I soon got sick of dossing about and not having any money so I literally just started to apply for anything and everything which really is a recipe for certain disaster! I soon found a job working in a new shop that was opening just round the corner from Serv-U called Jasper's Jeans. The shop sold, surprisingly, every type of jean trouser you could think of. There were different makes (Levis and Easy were the main makes we sold), different colours too (red, yellow, green and purple jeans) and even flared, bell-bottomed jeans (for all those Madchester types). Jasper's was a new venture - I recall the owners had just one other shop that hadn't been open for very long in another town. I began my employment with them almost immediately. The premises it occupied had previously been an office supplies shop that had just gone bust (we'd bought our office bits from there when working at Serv-

U) so I and all the other newly employed staff worked hard on getting the shop set up and the shelves full for the opening day. I got on well with most of the other staff members at Jasper's as we were all of a similar age. We would sometimes pop to Muswells, a bar just on the other side of the road, for a few drinks after work some evenings before departing for home. I remember Sharon, Matthew, Jo and Rudi in particular as I was able to have a proper laugh with them, in the shop and at the pub. I wasn't very happy working at Jasper's though. How could I be? A few years back I'd been working at Ocean Software and now I was selling poxy jeans and Joe Bloggs t-shirts! It was hardly an impressive career progression. The bosses weren't that nice either and could quite easily turn up at work in a bad mood and took it out on us. We'd get moaned at if they thought we weren't doing much (even when there was literally nothing to do) and periodically, as an in-joke, we all would tell whoever we were standing with that we were "just going off to pat the jeans". If we made it look like we were tidying the stock on the racks (even if it didn't actually need tidying) it would save us from getting grumped at!

Jo and Rudi, who were both funny as fuck, were the first staff to go. They were both particularly sassy girls and, a few weeks down the line, ended up being called into the office as they hadn't, apparently, been pulling their weight on the shop floor and received a verbal warning each. As they came out of the office they immediately commenced in a thorough ransacking of the shop floor. They were pulling piles of jeans and t-shirts off the shelves and throwing them all over the place. Sharon and I looked on in bemusement while we tried to stifle our laughter as previously folded garments went flying over our heads. This all happened around midday so the shop was pretty busy with customers out on their lunch breaks. They looked on in horror as the spectacle unfolded before them. I thought it absolutely hilarious though was a little bit worried in case the bosses noticed that I was doing my best to hide the grin that was trying to form on my face. If they did I was sure I'd be the next one out the door. The bosses rushed out of the office as soon as they realised what was going on and tried to appease the girls and stop the carnage but Jo and Rudi just kissed their teeth at them and shouted obscenities and flicked 'V' signs until they had had enough. They did eventually stop after a few minutes, grabbed their coats and left the shop. I never saw either of them ever again. Us, still employed, staff then had to tidy up the mess they'd left behind.

I myself didn't last much longer. One Saturday, a few weeks later, I had been positioned in the shop near Sharon for most of the day. So when I wasn't serving anyone I'd have a chat with her to pass the time. Come Monday morning Sharon was called into the office and was praised for how well she had done at work two days before. Straight after, I was also called into the office and given a verbal warning for a) talking too much on Saturday and for b) running down the stairs in the shop too fast! I ask you! What a load of bollocks! Whenever I'd been talking to anyone on the Saturday in question it had been Sharon. Yet she got praised!? I came to the conclusion that this had all occurred because my tits weren't as big as Sharon's and was the result of plain old sexism. Sharon was a good looking girl. They wanted me out and had started their little plot to get rid of the blokes from the shop and keep the 'dolly birds' (their thinking not mine) to flash their teeth, cleavage and flutter their eyelashes at the mainly male customer base. As for the speed at which I descended the stairs, that was just a plain ridiculous reason to give anyone a verbal warning. If it really offended them that much they could have just had a quiet word and I'd have taken my time ascending from the upper floor. I'd never, ever been given a warning before and certainly didn't deserve one for that. I told them to stuff their job up their arses and walked out. Happily, within six months or so Jasper's Jeans had closed down, never to be heard of again. Twats!

I now had a new best mate who I'd met through a mutual friend down the Racehorse pub on Abington Square, Northampton one night and he was called Jim. He was a couple of years younger than me (having been born in 1973) and we'd started hanging out together out in town and visiting each other's houses a few times a week to watch a film or two on VHS video cassette at weekends. We'd make a huge fry up for tea, choose two VHS videos to watch then proceed to down copious amounts of neat vodka (which I find tastes revolting). This would then usually result in us both throwing up in the sink. We'd go to bed around 3am and get up the next day around midday. This carried on for a few months then Jim and I realised we were both not doing much with our lives and decided to go off travelling for a bit so we both had to raise a wodge of cash each to finance it. Selling my Atari ST and Commodore Amiga, monitor and my substantial collection of original and pirated software I'd got for them was the quickest way to achieve that, much to my later regret!

Friday 30 October:

"Carol, Emily, James and Oliver came round. They're going to buy my Amiga and monitor off me for £300. It's cheap but I need to sell it to raise the cash to go away."*

**(Auntie Carol, who had married my mum's only brother Andrew, and their three young children.)*

Saturday 31 October:

"Woke up early. Andrew and Carol and co. came round so I had to get up at 11 to show Andrew the computer I was selling."

Sunday 1 November:

"Jim and I got up about 8:15. Loaded car up with stuff for the car boot sale. Drove to Cliftonville. Sold loads of stuff. I made about £220 (sold my ST)."

Sunday 8 November:

"Andrew, Carol, Emily, James and Oliver came round at 11ish. Packed all the Amiga stuff for Andrew to take. Buying it for £320."

Thinking back now, I *really* regret selling all of my 16-bit collection off. It was the only time I ever did that. With all my other systems once I'd got bored of them, I just put them in a box and stored them in the attic. I really must have been cheesed off with everything that had happened during the last six to twelve months to get rid of it all entirely. I still dream of trawling eBay one day and recognising my hand writing on a bunch of pirated Amiga games (there was at least two full disc boxes full of them) and finding my collection intact, along with all the originals I'd bought, ready for me to buy back. I had hoped Uncle Andrew still had the Amiga and software, maybe stored, forgotten, in a room in his house somewhere but when I got round to asking him he just didn't remember what happened to it once James, Emily and Oliver, their children, had got bored of it all. What a shame. I'd love to know where it all is now. I like to think of it all sitting in someone's attic somewhere, waiting to be brought down and set up again.

I was now busy expanding my musical interests by getting into other bands and artists from the sixties like The Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd, Love, Captain Beefheart, The Turtles, The Incredible String Band, The Doors, The Zombies, The Kinks and The Small Faces. It helped that the HMV record store in the Grosvenor Centre had their first, that I can recall seeing anyway, '3 for £20' CD offer on so I was able to buy a lot of albums all at the same time. I kept a detailed diary during this period and there's hardly any mention at all of computer games. It's full of accounts of going out drinking and socialising as often as I could, though I didn't often get drunk as I couldn't, then or now, handle alcohol at all and would usually be seen propping up a wall and holding half a coke or, if it was late, a can of Red Bull to keep me awake. Back in 1992 I could go out for the night with a fiver and still come back with change six hours later.

Commodore Amiga software owned in 1992:

(Listed alphabetically: Title, developer/label)

1. 'Parasol Stars' by Ocean Software.

One paltry new game gained this year and I didn't even have to buy this one. Ocean staffer John Palmer had been raving at me about this title via letters we had exchanged between ourselves. He then sent me through the post a brand spanking new copy in a padded jiffy bag for free. I wasn't really showing much interest in games by this time and it would be the last ever title I got for my Amiga. Not a bad title to go out on though.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1992:

Frankie Howerd – 18 April.

Benny Hill – 20 April.

Anthony Perkins – 12 September.

Denholm Elliot – 6 October.

Michael Robbins – 11 December.

Chapter 19: 1993

“...decided to buy myself a Super Nintendo Entertainment System.”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

'Groundhog Day' – Harold Ramis, 12 February.

'Army of Darkness' – Sam Raimi, 19 February.

'Jurassic Park' – Steven Spielberg, 11 June.

'Schindler's List' – Steven Spielberg, 15 December.

The original travel plan me and Jim devised was for us to hitchhike around Europe and just see where we ended up. Mum and Dad were still friendly with Bob Beezhold, our old next door neighbour from the Lutterworth Road days, who had also moved up to the Headlands area of Northampton a few months before we did and lived a two minute walk from our house. He agreed to give us a head start on our adventure and take us to Italy in his lorry. After a few days loose planning and the buying of rucksacks, a tent, sleeping bags and a book on how to survive in the wilderness we set off. I went with Bob and Jim went in the lorry of one of his workmates. After a couple of days we were dropped off in Verona, Italy in a restaurant car park, a place the lorry drivers would regularly stop at for a meal. We were told we could meet up with them here when we had decided we had had enough and wanted to come back for a free lift home. Trouble was, we were dropped off in what seemed like the middle of an industrial estate at night and our attempts at trying to get out of it and find somewhere to put up a tent were proving fruitless. Darkness was quickly approaching and we were still stuck in the same industrial estate. We decided that our only option was now to find a hotel and spend the night there instead. After walking for hours we eventually found one only to be greeted by an old man who had to hold a machine up to his throat to talk. Obviously he was speaking Italian so neither of us had a clue what he was saying. The only thing we found mildly amusing but also a bit scary was that the owner not only looked a bit like the scary looking Davros from the TV show *'Doctor Who'*, he also sounded like him.

We lasted two weeks in Italy. We didn't manage to hitchhike anywhere. Every driver we tried to thumb down drove past us. After a nightmare second night spent looking for a forest and finding nothing but villages, in one of which we pitched our tent up in a vineyard, not 200 metres from someone's house. Neither of us got much sleep, if at all, that night. As we were surrounded by the constant noise of a big dog barking and clanking metal we half expected to be woken up by some angry Italian whose land we had encroached upon, shouting at us and, probably, with his big, angry dog gnashing its teeth at us. At first light, surrounded by fog, we packed up as soon as the light allowed and got the hell out of there. I recall thinking “Should I take a picture to record this moment?” I didn't as that would have meant spending another ten seconds there. That was too much. We wanted to go. That day we managed to find our way to the train station at Verona then got the train to Milan, the nearest city, and spent the duration of our time in a youth hostel. I remember being impressed by the stunning Milan Cathedral, an amazing building to look round. We had a good holiday but that's not why we went. At the earliest moment we found our way back to the restaurant and met up with Bob and his lorry driver mates and got driven back home to Northampton.

The next plan was a trip to Israel where we planned to find work at a Kibbutz and stay a good few months. Again, that didn't go exactly to plan but we managed to last four weeks, two more than the last attempt, before we ran out of money. The only work we managed to procure was hanging around at Damascus Gate, one of the entrances to the old part of Jerusalem, collaring back-packers and asking them if they wanted to stay at a hostel with whom, the owner, we had gotten friendly with and was letting us stay at for a discounted price. We were crap at that and soon gave it up and decided to use the time spent as a real holiday. It was an amazing trip though and my first real glimpse at a more basic way of life surrounded by ancient history. We ventured to the Dead Sea and floated in the salty water, climbed Masada, which is an Judean fortress from the first century BCE situated in the Southern District of Israel on top of an isolated rock plateau, in time to see the sunrise over the mountains and got to know both the old and new quarters of Jerusalem. Despite all the history around us my most vivid memory of being in there was from when we were hanging around Damascus Gate trying to entice tourists to stay in the hostel we were working for. While standing about we saw a black cat get run over. The car wheel

drove right over the poor things head, completely flattening it to the floor. The body was undamaged so its legs flailed around for at least five minutes, making it look like it was trying to get up and run off. It was horrific! I stood aghast at the sight before me and felt physically sick. Jim went and had a closer look. The head was mashed so it was just reacting to electric impulses shooting through its body as it died. It was a really awful thing to see! We got back to Tel-Aviv airport with one Shekel between us (about 25p back then) so we timed our return just right and flew back home to Northampton.

On the very same day of our arrival back home I received a phone from Dick Raybould at Spinadisc Records, Northampton's most popular independent record shop, about a job. I'd written to him about possible employment months ago and had completely forgotten I'd done so. An interview was quickly arranged and I started work the next week. It was from Dick I'd bought my first ever single back in 1983, Kenny Everett's Sid Snot single '*Snot Rap*'. Since then he'd moved the shop to much bigger premises down from Abington Square to Abington Street, which was right in the centre of town. Jim had also found himself a new job and, while we both saved up a deposit to rent our own house, lived with me and my parents at Longland Road. After a few months of full-time employment we found a three bedroom house to share in Gordon Street in the Semilong district of town and moved in. By this time I'd completely given up on with the notion of trying to earn a living from making computer graphics. That was now in the past.

Spinadisc was a really great place to work. Other than the boss, who must have been in his late 50s by that point, everyone else employed there was more or less the same age as me (late teens to mid-20s). We had a pop, jazz and classical music on the bottom floor (where I worked) and upstairs featured the indie and dance CDs and records. I started to get in to many more bands and singers, many of which I would never have heard of had I not worked in the shop. I enjoyed again the fact that you never who was going to walk in next customer-wise or what you were going to get asked for. The shop had many regular customers who I eventually got to know well and learned what their musical tastes consisted of which made recommending new releases to them easier. A big plus was that every day brought the excitement of possibly discovering something new that I would then buy and add to my now ever growing CD collection. It made going into work every day a pleasure.

Not long after I got the computer game bug again and decided to buy myself a Super Nintendo Entertainment System, otherwise known as a SNES. I can't recall why I went with a SNES over a Sega Megadrive. It was most probably the promise of the four '*Super Mario*' games which were included in the '*Super Mario All Stars*' pack that aided my inevitable choice. I'd had a taste of Mario games on the Game Boy so could well have fancied experiencing them properly in full colour and on a proper TV screen and that was what swayed my final decision. The machine itself had been out a while having been launched in the UK on 11 April 1992 so I was pretty late to the party. The cartridge that came in the pack with the console itself contained a compilation of graphically and musically upgraded versions of '*Super Mario Bros.*' (1985), '*Super Mario Bros. 2*' (1988), '*Super Mario Bros. 3*' (1988), which had previously appeared on Nintendo's console before, the NES, plus '*Super Mario Bros. The Lost Levels*' (1986) which was a special version of the original '*Super Mario Bros.*' game. The standalone release of '*Super Mario All Stars*' proved very successful for the company going on to sell 10.55 million copies worldwide. The attractive yellow box the SNES was packaged in promised:

"Unique Mode 7 3-D graphics – Over 32,000 colours – Digital stereo sound"

At the end of the year we had a jolly evening out after eighteen tickets arrived in the post for a us to visit a recording of an edition of '*Top of the Pops*'. I'd sent off a few months back to see if we could get any tickets and a bundle of them soon made their way over to me. The show we went to was recorded on Wednesday 6 October between 7:10 – 8:15pm and broadcast the next day at 7pm. Present was myself, Jim and his brother Mark, both my sisters, Paul & Hayden Andrews and a heap more.

Presented by Tony Dortie:

1. '**Life**' by Haddaway (rel. 5 November 1993)
2. '**I Would Do Anything for Love**' by Meat Loaf (video) (rel. 30 August 1993)
3. '**Now I Know What Made Otis Blue**' by Paul Young (exact rel. date not known)
4. '**All About Soul**' by Billy Joel (pre-recorded performance) (exact rel. date not known)

5. **'Tracks of my Tears'** by Go West (exact rel. date not known)
6. **'Distant Sun'** by Crowded House (rel. September 1993)
7. **'Bumped'** by Right Said Fred (rel. October 1993)
8. **'Relight My Fire'** by Take That (rel. 4 October 1993)

It was a great laugh and the highlight for me was when Lulu did her first entrance during *'Relight My Fire'* with Take That, which was the current number one single, and her heel went as she came down the stairs and promptly fell over. The track was stopped and they had to start over. It was hilarious!

Original Super Nintendo games bought as full price new releases:

(Title, developer, UK release date)

1. **'Super Star Wars'** by Sculptured Software/LucasArts, 2 April 1993.
2. **'Super Mario World'** by Nintendo EAD, 11 April 1992.
3. **'Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts'** by Capcom, 10 December 1992.
4. **'Tiny Toon Adventures: Buster Busts Loose'** by Konami, 24 June 1993.
5. **'Drakkhen'** by Infogrames, 1992.
6. **'Starwing'** by Nintendo, 3 June 1993.
7. **'Super Mario All-Stars'** by Nintendo EAD, 16 December 1993.
8. **'Yoshi's Island'** by Nintendo EAD, 6 October 1995.

Even though the games were fantastic I never really got that much into my SNES console. As the games were on cartridges it was impossible to get any copies from mates to bolster up your collection and, thus, your choice of games to play. I didn't even know anyone else who had a machine so I couldn't even borrow any titles from anyone else. They weren't cheap either. It appears to be harder to find the retail prices of SNES games nowadays than it does the older Spectrum titles. The latter had the prices on their respective adverts, SNES titles tended not to. A quick look at a 1993 Argos catalogue reveals that SNES cartridges cost anything between £40 and £60 new. That's the equivalent of £72.66 and £108.99 in today's money (2022). That was a lot of cash back in 1993 when, at the time, I was only earning around £100 a week after tax at the record shop.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1993:

Mick Ronson – 29 April.
Les Dawson – 10 June.
Vincent Price – 25 October.
River Phoenix – 31 October.
Bill Bixby – 22 November.
Kenneth Connor – 28 November.

Chapter 20: 1994 to 1995

“So you’d bought yourself a Sega Saturn games console but had to go elsewhere in order to buy a game to play on it!”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

'Forrest Gump' – Robert Zemeckis, 6 July 1994.

'Pulp Fiction' – Quentin Tarantino, 14 October 1994.

'Interview with the Vampire' – Neil Jordan, 11 November 1994.

'Kids' – Larry Clark, 28 July 1995.

'Toy Story' – John Lasseter, 22 November 1995.

'12 Monkeys' – Terry Gilliam, 29 December 1995.

While I was at Spinadisc I also fell into DJ'ing. Music was now my main passion and computer games, for a while at least, barely got a look in. My cousins Hayden and Paul had been asked to DJ on a Saturday night at Madison's Night Club which was situated above GX Superbowl (a bowling alley) in St. James Retail Park. They asked me if I'd be interested in joining forces with them for the venture. I did! None of us had ever done it before though we got the gig by pretending we had ("Yeah. We've done a few weddings and that!"). The three of us had long been moaning to each other that there wasn't a nightclub in Northampton that really played the type of music we liked, which was 50's, 60's and 70s pop and soul as well as some of the new indie stuff that was coming out. What better way to put it right than by doing it ourselves? This happened just as the so-called Brit Pop phenomenon was starting. A lot of new music sounded like music that had been recorded in the 60s so you could play a modern song straight after a song that had been recorded thirty years ago and you wouldn't be able to tell. We called the night *'Supersonic'* after the debut Oasis single that had just been released on 11 April 1994. We would put the night on every first and third Saturday of the month and it ran from 10pm until 2pm. Paul, who was a graphic designer by trade did the flyers for the nights. He developed our own brand. Each flyer would contain one of our musical heroes along with a line from a song underneath that bore some relation to the person used to illustrate it. Examples include Sweep (from *'Sooty and Sweep'*) with *'Hand in Glove'* written underneath, Barry White's text read *'I am the Walrus'* (he was the 'Love Walrus' after all), Steve Marriot was accompanied by *'Firestarter'* (he, unfortunately, died in a fire started by smoking a cigarette in bed) and a picture of Elvis as child with his parents along with *'It's a Family Affair'* (which also alluded to the fact me, Paul and Hayden were all related). We'd have three months' worth of dates on the reverse so we could re-use the same flyer for multiple nights and so Paul didn't have to design and print new flyers each week. We had a choice selection of mates who we'd always put on the guest list and they'd be able get in free and would nearly always come because it didn't cost them anything. The night only took a few goes before it started to get really busy.

The first *'Supersonic'* occurred on 15 April 1995 with the second taking place on 6 May. Between the three of us we DJ'd two 45-minute slots each (The first 15 minutes was used to warm up, then we'd start properly at 10:15, the next at 11:00, then 11:45, 12:30 then finally 1:15 until close at 2) using the first slot to play all sorts of new music and stuff you just didn't usually hear played in nightclubs as people were coming in and getting their first drinks. This worked really well as, with me working at Spinadisc, I was able to get promo copies of singles and albums that weren't yet released and, on quite a few occasions, our night would be the first time that our patrons would hear new songs by their then current favourite artists. I lost count of the number of times someone would come up to the DJ booth during those first, early slots and ask, "What's this you're playing now?" so they could make a mental note to go out and get themselves a copy later. As the night got busier and everyone got drunker we then had to stick to playing tunes that everyone knew as all people wanted to do by that time was dance, cop off, be sick or just have a good time. After a few months everyone knew everyone else, there was never any trouble and *'Supersonic'* at Madisons was the place to be. We'd argue over who was going to finish last as that was when everyone was at their most drunk and you'd get the best crowd reaction. If it was my turn to finish last I always tried to finish on a positive anthem so that people would leave feeling the love instead of wanting to smash someone's face in. My frequent last songs of the night included

'Hey Jude' and 'All You Need is Love' by The Beatles or 'I am the Resurrection' by The Stone Roses (which I never, ever faded early! That was deemed a punishable crime if you did that!). Seeing hundreds of people all on the dance floor singing "Nahh, na, na, nana, na, nahh. Nana, na, nahh. Heyyy Jude!" with their arms around the person next to them always brought a huge smile to my face. Seeing just that would make the whole night worthwhile to me. People would be filing out after the music had been turned off and they'd still be singing it. I tried to make people leave the venue with a positive message in their head, rather than with the urge to smash someone in the face! The money we got at the end was pretty good too. The final sum depended on how many people actually paid the entrance fee. Most nights we could make a fair bit of cash just off the door. This would then have to be split three ways after Paul had taken out the cost of printing the flyers and paying the door staff. We were loving it. Not only were we filling a gap in the market for all those people that were into the same music as us, but we were also receiving a healthy top-up to the cash we earned from our full-time jobs, coming away most nights with at least a couple of hundred each.

Another trip down to London for 'Top of the Pops' occurred on Wednesday 10 May 1995 to be broadcast the next day. Present was me, Jim and Dan Drage. This time I only managed to get three tickets; the BBC must have been clamping down on how many were sent to one person. Again, we had no idea who was going to be performing their latest record before we went. I wore my new Supergrass t-shirt that I'd just bought from Spinadisc and just happened to catch the band's first ever performance on the programme that day. I sort of hoped that, amongst the sea of permed and wet look teen-aged girl's hairstyles, the band noticed me showing my support and spotted their own t-shirt in the audience. I was stood at the front so it wouldn't have been that hard for them to see me!

Presented by Simon Mayo:

1. '**Lenny**' by Supergrass (rel. 1 May 1995)
2. '**This Is How We Do It**' by Montell Jordan (rel. 6 February 1995)
3. '**We're Gonna Do It Again**' (video) by Manchester United featuring Stryker (rel. 1 May 1995)
4. '**Scatman**' by Scatman John (originally rel. on 30 November 1994 then re-rel. in 1995)
5. '**I Believe**' by Blessid Union of Souls (rel. 18 February 1995)
6. '**Where Have You Been Tonight?**' by Shed Seven (rel. 1 May 1995)
7. '**Love City Groove**' by Love City Groove (the UK's entry for the 1995 Eurovision Song Contest where it came 10th)
8. '**Only One Road**' by Celine Dion (rel. 24 October 1994)
9. '**Dreamer**' by Livin' Joy (originally rel. on 22 August 1994 then re-rel. on 1 May 1995)

After around nine months of our successful 'Supersonic' night I was approached by a lad called Johnny Oliver who ran a night at the Roadmender, another music venue also in Northampton, called 'Madchester', There they played late 80s/early 90s indie music only. It had been going a fair few years already, much longer than 'Supersonic' had. Johnny attended a few 'Supersonic's and had been impressed with the sets I'd played. He was also a massive 60s fan and wanted to start another night at the Roadmender where he had a bit more freedom to play a bigger selection of tunes and a spare Friday was coming up at the venue. It was also a much bigger venue with a crowd capacity of around 850, compared to around 250 for Madisons. He asked me if I wanted to join forces with him and start a new club night. 'Weekender' was soon up and running with the added bonus that, as there was only two of us, we had two hours of play time each (an hour on then an hour off to mingle!) and, of course, the money gained would only need to be split two ways. 'Weekender' launched on Friday 30 June 1995. Again, this night was, at first, a resounding success and there were many times we had to stop people from coming in as the venue was full to capacity.

8 July 1995 saw the UK launch of the new Sega console, the Saturn. I hadn't been using my SNES for ages. I'd lost the box the console came in (or just thrown it away, stupid mistake!) and the machine and games were consigned to a cardboard box and put away in the attic. At some point near the end of the year I got myself a Sega Saturn. The games for the machine didn't come on cartridges like the SNES did but on CDs instead. CDs aren't as sturdy as cartridges and they get scratched easily. Plus, as the data has to be read into the machine from the disc, you had to endure loading times – nowhere near as bad as loading from tape in the Spectrum days but, still, there were delays to getting the game up and running. To me it seemed like a bit of a backward

step having got used to the instantaneous loading of SNES titles. By the end of the year I'd only bought a paltry two Saturn titles. Looking back, I didn't really use it that much. A quick look at the Spring/Summer 1996 catalogue from Argos reveals that a brand-new Sega Saturn would cost you a whopping £294, the equivalent of £495.07 today (2022). The odd thing I noticed is that there's not one game listed in the catalogue anywhere. So, you'd bought yourself a Sega Saturn games console but had to go elsewhere in order to buy a game to play on it!

Original Sega Saturn games bought as full price new releases:

(Title, developer, UK release date.)

1. **'Panzer Dragoon'** by Team Andromeda/Sega, 30 August 1995.
2. **'Virtua Cop'** (with light gun) by Sega AM2/Sega, 8 December 1995.

(Both release dates are from 'Sega Retro': <http://segaretro.org>)

I guess I didn't play these games very much. While I regard *'Panzer Dragoon'* as a classic now I only recognise the music (which, in my opinion, is beautiful) that plays during Level 1. Once I progress to Level 2 and beyond I don't know any of the music at all, which must mean I didn't get there very often back in the day! *'Virtua Cop'* was fun for a bit but the novelty of the light gun soon wore thin. Light guns never feel very realistic as there's no kick back when you fire the gun.

THOSE WE LOST IN 1994 TO 1995:

Kurt Cobain – 5 April 1994.
Roy Castle – 2 September 1994.
Kenny Everett – 4 April 1995.
Sterling Morrison – 30 August 1995.

Chapter 21: 1996 to 2000

“Who in their right mind would buy an N64 in 1997 without buying ‘*Super Mario 64*’?”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'White Squall' – Ridley Scott, 2 February 1996.
- 'Trainspotting' – Danny Boyle, 23 February 1996.
- 'The Nutty Professor' – Tom Shadyac, 28 June 1996.
- 'Independence Day' – Roland Emmerich, 6 July 1996.
- 'Mars Attacks!' – Tim Burton, 13 December 1996.
- 'Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery' – Jay Roach, 2 May 1997.
- 'The Lost World: Jurassic Park' – Steven Spielberg, 23 May 1997.
- 'Men in Black' – Barry Sonnenfeld, 2 July 1997.
- 'Boogie Nights' – Paul Thomas Anderson, 10 October 1997.
- 'Titanic' – James Cameron, 19 December 1997.
- 'There's Something About Mary' – Peter Farrelly/Bobby Farrelly, 15 July 1998.
- 'Existenz' – David Cronenberg, 30 April 1999.
- 'The Blair Witch Project' – Daniel Myrick/Eduardo Sánchez, 14 July 1999.
- 'Eyes Wide Shut' – Stanley Kubrick, 10 September 1999.
- 'Sleepy Hollow' – Tim Burton, 19 November 1999.
- 'Final Destination' – James Wong/David R. Ellis/Steven Quale, 17 March 2000.
- 'The Cell' – Tarsem Singh, 18 August 2000.

With the DJ'ing still doing so well another opportunity came up to expand our empire. Johnny and I fancied doing another separate night on one of the spare Saturdays at Madisons. I had two free Saturdays a month and there was still nowhere for me to go on those nights, so I thought “what the heck!” ‘*Pet Sounds*’ (named after the Beach Boys album from 1966, one of our joint favourites) launched on Saturday 10 February 1996. So, I was now DJ'ing three Saturdays every month at Madisons (with a guaranteed rest on the fourth Saturday and a bonus night off when a month had five) as well as one Friday a month at the Roadmender. Again, ‘*Pet Sounds*’ was a resounding success and there were many times we had to stop people from coming in as the venue was nearly always sold out.

I soldiered on with my Sega Saturn for a while, buying a grand total of eight games for the machine. It whiled away the time some days but I was so busy with work and DJ'in I barely had time to use it. It mainly just sat gathering dust sitting under the TV and my final purchase was a copy of ‘*Virtua Cop 2*’ which was released in the UK on the 21 November 1996. It soon ended up getting boxed back up and put up in the attic for bit. Then, after a while, I sold it to Karl Sadowski, who was a friend of mine I'd met while DJ'in (and was also the lead singer and bass player in a guitar band called Glendon (originally called Blew Rinse, then Glendon, then Goldman, then they spilt up!) who I was managing in my spare time for a while. That story would take another book!) and who ended up lodging at my house for a few months. When he moved out after about six months he enquired about where my Sega Saturn and games were and he ended up buying it all from me. I probably let it all go for £50 or something equally ridiculous. Last time I saw my old Saturn it was set up in his flat where he was playing ‘*Panzer Dragoon Saga*’, one of the last titles to be released for the console on 5 June 1998. That title is now considered one the best games of all time and is one of the more sought-after titles for the console. Should you want to buy one now, looking at eBay, a copy in decent condition, could set you back anything between £500-£900! A few years ago, I asked Karl if he remembered what had happened to his (thus, my old) Sega Saturn and the collection of games that came with it and he hadn't got a clue. He couldn't remember where it had gone, but gone it had (including that copy of ‘*Panzer Dragoon Saga*’)! Crap! I was secretly hoping he still had it all and would, perhaps, sell me it all back.

I continued to work at the record shop and Brit Pop became, for a while at least, the most popular music scene in Britain. Many classic albums were released which went on to spawn top ten singles, performances on ‘*Top of the Pops*’ and trips out by us to see some of the bands play live at various venues around the country (mainly at home in Northampton, or we'd drive to

Leicester, London or Bedford). These albums were listened to intently as they were harvested by myself and my co-DJ's as choice selections were selected for airings at the club nights. New albums from this period that went into my collection included (in chronological order):

'Up to Our Hips' by the Charlatans (rel. 21 March 1994).
'Parklife' by Blur (rel. 25 April 1994).
'Definitely Maybe' by Oasis (rel. 29 August 1994).
'Jollification' by the Lightning Seeds (rel. 5 September 1994).
'Dog Man Star' by Suede (rel. 10 October 1994).
'Homegrown' by Dodgy (rel. 24 October 1994).
'Second Coming' by the Stone Roses (rel. 5 December 1994).
'Wake Up!' by the Boo Radlleys (rel. 27 March 1995).
'I Should Coco' by Supergrass (rel. 15 May 1995).
'Stanley Road' by Paul Weller (rel. 7 June, 1995).
'It's Great When You're Straight...Yeah' by Black Grape (rel. 7 August 1995).
'The Charlatans' by the Charlatans (rel. 28 August 1995).
'The Great Escape' by Blur (rel. 11 September 1995).
'(What's the Story?) Morning Glory' by Oasis (rel. 2 October 1995).
'Different Class' by Pulp (rel. 30 October 1995).
'Drop the Roof' by Out of my Hair (rel. late 1995).
'Expecting to Fly' by the Bluetones (rel. 12 February 1996).
'Moseley Shoals' by Ocean Colour Scene (rel. 8 April 1996).
'The Sun is Often Out' by the Longpigs (rel. 29 April 1996).
'Coming Up' by Suede (rel. 2 September 1996).
'K' by Kula Shaker (rel. 16 September 1996).
'Attack of the Grey Lantern' by Mansun (rel. 17 February 1997).
'Barafundle' by Gorky's Zygotic Mynci (rel. 7 April 1997).
'In It for the Money' by Supergrass (rel. 21 April 1997).
'Fourfold Remedy' by Velocette (rel. 1998).

This year marked the first time I bought a PC computer. I purchased it mainly so that I could experience the World Wide Web, which was now becoming very popular and I was interested in finding out for myself what it was all about. I bought a Hewlett Packard Pavilion machine from PC World (that I paid off over the next year using a payment plan so probably ended up paying nearly double the retail price once it was all paid for). As to what specification the PC was I have no idea, it wouldn't have been mega powerful or that expensive. All I was interested in was that it could access the internet and play modern games. I got myself an AOL internet account (didn't everyone back then?) after getting the software on a free disc attached to some *'How to use the internet'* magazine and immersed myself in being able to get information at the click of a mouse button, talking to strangers in chat rooms, downloading music (when a whole song could take ten minutes to arrive on your computer as an .mp3 file) and e-mail. I was so new to all this I remember having a problem and ringing up AOL for some help. During the course of the conversation, I enquired if someone sent me an email while I wasn't connected to the internet would I miss it? I had no idea that they stockpiled and waited for you to log on before delivery. I was that green! After a few months of using my new PC I realised it was already struggling to run new games at the proper speed. I ended up having to buy a *'3DFX Voodoo Graphics Card'* so that I could run more graphic intensive titles. Truthfully, I found it all a bit of a faff and only purchased a total of five games for it. Even with the graphics card installed it still wasn't running things properly without stuttering. I ended up using the PC just for the internet and for running a ZX Spectrum emulator, along with a load of classic game tape images. The novelty of having the games load instantly and not having to wait for it to load in via tape was great. A bit later I decided that I really wanted to get the, soon to be released, Nintendo 64 (known after this as N64) for games playing. PC hardware was changing so fast that my own PC computer was soon way too slow to run any new releases on it at all and I gave up even trying to get anything that had just been released up and running on it. All within six short months of buying the damn thing.

One day while at work a lady came in and asked me if we had a copy of the new Fun Lovin' Criminals album *'Come Find Yourself'*. It hadn't actually been released yet (it came out on 20 February 1996 so this must have been a few months before that) but I had been sent a

promotional copy of it via one of the DJ promotions companies and it was sat at home. It wasn't the sort of the music I played out so I told her she could have my copy and asked the lady to come back tomorrow. Just before she left she said, "Do you like Oasis?" I told her I did and she left the shop. I remembered to take in the CD she'd enquired about the next day and, just as I had asked, the lady came back in. As I handed over the CD she handed me an envelope and said "Thank you so much. This is for you. Enjoy!" She'd just walked out the door by the time I'd opened the envelope and in it was two tickets and various passes for the Sunday gig by, the then huge, Oasis at Knebworth which had long been sold out. I was gobsmacked. I'd resigned myself to not going and had been a little dejected at the thought of missing out on all the fun. I was a massive Oasis fan from the beginning of their commercial career having first see them play in the bar in the Roadmender on the 8 May 1994 (the ticket cost £4!) I, and everyone else who had attended that night, had been blown away by what we witnessed. I'd seen a few more gigs after that and each venue had been bigger than the last:

1. **Roadmender**, Northampton, 8 May 1994.
2. **Corn Exchange**, Cambridge, 4 December 1994.
3. **Sheffield Arena**, 22 April 1995.
4. **Granby Hall**, Leicester, 15 September 1995.
5. **Knebworth Park**, 11 August 1996.

This latest show was the culmination of their meteoric rise to fame, a gig in front of 250,000 people! It all happened in such a short time frame too, just barely over two years. 11 August arrived and me, Jim and Craig Brown (who had bought his own ticket) made our way to the gig in the car. We got there in the early afternoon as Kula Shaker were due to kick off the day at 2pm. After hours of watching the support bands (Kula Shaker were followed by Dreadzone, Cast, The Charlatans & The Manic Street Preachers) and waiting for the main event the pain in my legs was excruciating. We didn't even dare leave where we were stood to go to the loo in case we couldn't get back to the same place. It was a lovely, hot summers day and by the time Oasis came on, at 8:30pm, it was just getting dark and we were knackered. Among their well know songs the band played two songs from the then unreleased '*Be Here Now*' album ('*My Big Mouth*' and '*Getting Better Man*') and barely anyone was singing along as most people didn't know them yet. When '*Be Here Now*' eventually came out I listened to it a couple of times and barely played it again. I'd totally gone off them. There were too many overdubs, most of the songs were just a bit too long and it just didn't have the impact on me the first two albums did. Up to the release of their third album me and most of my mates had been playing their songs to death at home and playing them out at my club nights so I didn't really need to listen to them again, they were ingrained into my head. So, I think by the time of '*Be Here Now*'s release, which I ended up not liking much anyway, I was Oasis'd out. I barely listened to them again for years.

Fast forward twenty five years to 2021 and a documentary about the gigs, called '*Oasis Knebworth 1996*', came out at cinemas. Obviously I went to see it and found the whole thing very emotional to watch. I remember seeing the cameras flying about during the gig recording the concert and thought to myself "Oh good, looks like we'll be able to get this on video soon to watch at home". I had no idea I'd have to wait a quarter of a century before I could do so! Seeing the documentary reminded me of how good the actual event was. It was weird, I could feel myself welling up at least five points during the film. I had to try hard to contain myself as I had a stranger on my right and didn't want to look like a wally sat there in the cinema with streams of tears down my face. I don't really understand fully why it had that effect on me but it did. Even better was, when they released the documentary on Blu-ray a few months later, it included both the Saturday and Sunday gigs in their entirety so I was able to relive the whole gig I attended from start to finish in my living room. That, again, was very emotional to see after all this time. Looking back, this event was the peak of my 1990s musical journey. Luckily, I had the right job, the right tastes and the right mates to make it a pivotal era in my life and I'll never forget the bands, songs and friends that accompanied me during that period.

On Thursday 26 September 1996 we went to see one of our favorite new bands, The Longpigs, play at the Roadmender in Northampton. After the gig we hung about for a bit and managed to get to talk to the band. In the course of the probably meaningless conversation they invited us to along to a recording of an episode for the second series of Channel 4's television show '*TFI Friday*' the very next day. The lead singer Crispin explained that they were supposed to

have invited some fan club members but had forgotten. So, the next day me, Jim, Craig and a few other mates went down to the Riverside Studios in London and were there in the audience (not in the bar area where Chris Evans did his links from but down on the main floor in front of the bands). Martin Clunes, Ulrika Johnson and Cleo Roccas (famous for being on Kenny Everett's various TV shows) were the guests that day and the songs performed were:

1. **'Marblehead Johnson'** by the Bluetones (rel. 16 September 1996)
2. **'You're Gorgeous'** by Babybird (rel. 30 September 1996)
3. **'Rotterdam (Or Anywhere)'** by the Beautiful South (rel. 30 September 1996)
4. **'Lost Myself'** by the Longpigs (exact rel. date not known) (<https://youtu.be/8STJ004DbfQ>)

The new Nintendo 64 console was launched in the UK and Europe on the 1 March 1997. I didn't buy one on the very first day of release though as I hadn't placed a pre-order so there was no chance in hell of me getting one that day. I didn't even try and I definitely didn't fancy queuing up to purchase one as I wasn't an ultra-Nintendo geek (I'd only shown a passing interest in my Game Boy and SNES). Having to wait a few days was no big deal for me but, eventually, get one I did. Spinadisc was only about a one-minute walk from the nearest GAME store, so it was no hassle to keep an eye on their stock during my lunch breaks and trips to the newsagents whilst at work. A week or so after the initial batch of N64s had sold out I saw that GAME had some N64's back in stock so I did manage to get one for myself pretty quickly. For the privilege I paid the launch price of £249.99 for the base unit and one controller. That was quite a lot of money back in 1997, probably the equivalent of just over two weeks wages. I also had to stump up some extra cash to buy a game or two alongside the machine as it didn't come with any already supplied in the box. The console was launched in the UK alongside six titles; *'Super Mario 64'*, *'Pilotwings 64'*, *'Star Wars: Shadow of the Empire'*, *'Turok: Dinosaur Hunter'*, *'Fifa Soccer 64'* and *'Wayne Gretzkey's 3D Hockey'*. I wasn't the slightest bit interested in football or hockey so I couldn't have cared less about the last two games. All the magazines had been going on about how amazing the new Mario game was so that was deemed an essential first purchase (Who in their right mind would buy an N64 in 1997 without buying *'Super Mario 64'*? You'd have needed to have your head tested if you did!). I then chose *'Turok'* as my second title. I was still fascinated by Dinosaurs and, in this game, you could kill as many as you wanted! These two purchases added around another £100 to the money I'd already spent. I passed on *'Pilotwings 64'* entirely, it just didn't appeal to me though I would buy the *'Star Wars'* title a bit later on when my bank balance had recovered somewhat from this initial outlay. A quick internet look up of the Argos catalogue from Autumn/Winter 1997 shows that the console then cost £148 with one controller. A copy of *'Super Mario 64'*, *'Mario Kart'* or *'Star Wars: Shadow of the Empire'* would have set you back £54.75 each. That's £164.25 for all three games, more than the console itself. Just out of interest, in the same catalogue the Sega Saturn was then priced at £149, a Nintendo Game Boy (along with a Nintendo wallet) was £35.90, a Sony PlayStation with one controller was £169, a Sega Megadrive could now be got for only £79.50 and a Nintendo SNES was priced at £98.50.

While I was initially impressed by my N64 and the two titles I'd bought with it I didn't add any more games to my paltry collection of three for quite a while. The games were just a bit too expensive for me to justify a purchase and my wage from the record shop wasn't that brilliant. After six months or so after buying the console itself and getting a few more games I ended up selling on my N64 machine. I have no idea why I did that other than, maybe, I needed some cash quickly to pay something off or maybe I just didn't play with it enough. For some reason, I kept the titles I'd already bought though and soon came to realise I'd made a big mistake by selling it. I missed my N64 and its games. Luckily, around the same time I made this realisation, Nintendo decided to drop the price of the console in the UK by a whopping £100 in May 1998 so it didn't take long for me to save up some cash and buy a second brand new console. I must say, the advancement shown by the N64 was easily the biggest I'd ever seen when getting a new, next generation, console or computer. Going from the ZX Spectrum to the Amiga was pretty impressive, but a lot of the games could have been 8-bit games just with better graphics and groovier sound. To go from the SNES to the N64 was a massive experience and it felt like I was entering a whole new world. I've never seen a leap between machines that was as big as this before, or since. When a new console comes out today I can barely notice the difference anymore when compared to the previous machine it replaces. Though, saying that, it got close when I was able to use a VR (Virtual Reality) headset on a PlayStation 4 in November of 2017. That blew my mind. The main difference

here though was that VR didn't really take off, whereas the N64 did. I thought that was a great shame as VR opened up so many doors that we'd never had the key to before. To be able to actually move your head around and look at the scenery in *'The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim'* (originally released on 11 November, 2011, with the VR version coming out much later, on 2 April, 2018) for the first time took my breath away, much the same way plugging in *'Super Mario 64'* on the N64 and being able to fully walk around your surroundings in 1997 did.

As to what my most played N64 title was I'd have to go with *'Donkey Kong 64'* by Rare. I spent many hours on it during a bout of illness that occurred not long after the game was released. During this time period my day consisted of coffee, Marlboro Light cigarettes (of which I've given up now) and playing on *'Donkey Kong 64'*. I was barely eating anything due to my illness and exploring the land contained in my game helped keep my mind occupied. I had loved *'Banjo Kazooie'*, one of Rare's previous titles, so it was a no brainer that I was going to buy this one upon release as it was by the same company and used an improved engine. Along with the range of characters you could eventually use and the way that you could see the objects that the other characters could collect before you could actually pick them up (shown as transparent until you were actually playing the character that could collect them) made me want to get as far as I could into the game. My only criticism was that it was a little bit sprawling so you could, if you weren't careful and left a few days in between games, find yourself lost and forget what you were actually in the middle of doing. This usually resulted in lots of endless walking around trying to get yourself back on track. *'Donkey Kong 64'* also had a string of catchy tunes included that are chiseled into my memory for evermore.

For the next two years the N64 was my main console. I religiously bought Future PLC's *'N64'* magazine (and kept them all until around 2005 when I decided to bin them all like a first class wally. A few years after this crime I realised how stupid I'd been and ended up buying issues here and there from eBay until I had a complete collection – way more than I ever bought originally). The magazine was the successor to popular SNES magazine *'Super Play'* (a magazine I was completely oblivious to while actively owning a SNES so never, ever bought or read a copy) and employed a lot of the same staff to write their reviews.

Around mid-1999 I decided to buy myself the current and most popular console, a Sony PlayStation 1 which was set up under the television alongside my N64. The PlayStation 1 had already been out a good few years having been launched in the UK on 29 September 1995 so I knew it had a good, solid user base and a large and growing library of games. I'd been reading good things about it, some of my mates had a machine and a couple of the games available appealed to me. *'Metal Gear Solid'* was the title that persuaded me to stump up my hard-earned cash for the machine and was the game I bought along with it. Over the course of the next year or so I bought some older titles and a few more new games, but I never really got into it like I had with my previous computers and consoles. My game purchases were used so little that they all still look brand new (hold those discs up to the light and there's not a scratch or fingerprint on them still!) I'm not sure why I had this indifference towards the PlayStation 1. Maybe the novelty of gaming was actually starting to wear off, maybe I just wasn't that interested any more or maybe I just thought that I'd seen it all before (under various different guises) and nothing I saw really blew me away other than the aforementioned *'Metal Gear Solid'* and a game called *'Driver'* by Reflections Interactive and Crawfish Interactive and released in the UK on 25 June 1999. My PlayStation 1 ended up being my least used console out of all the various machines I'd owned so far.

Original Sega Saturn games bought as full price new releases:

(Title, developer, UK release date.)

1. **'Virtua Cop 2'** by Sega AM2/Sega, 12 December 1995.
2. **'Magic Carpet'** by Bullfrog/Electronic Arts, 29 March 1996.
3. **'Exhumed'** by Lobotomy Software/BMG Interactive, 26 September 1996.
4. **'Panzer Dragoon Zwei II'** by Team Andromeda/Sega, 5 October 1996.
5. **'Nights into Dreams'** (with controller) by Sonic Team/Sega, 19 September 1996.
6. **'Tomb Raider'** by Core Design/Eidos, 25 October 1996.

7. **'Virtua Cop 2'** by Sega AM2/Sega, 21 November 1996.

(All release dates are from 'Sega Retro': <http://segaretro.org>)

I bought all these games as they came out as new releases. The Saturn version of *'Tomb Raider'* was the first version of the game I ever played (and bought it again later so I could play it on my PlayStation 1 and my PC as well so I must have been pretty impressed by it). Yet again, I didn't really get far on most of these games. I just didn't put in enough time to progress much further than the initial stages of each game. My interest in new games was, perhaps, at its lowest ebb during this period. It would be re-ignited when I purchased my next, and what ended up being my favourite, console, the Nintendo 64.

Original PC games bought as full price new releases:

(Title, developer, UK release date)

1. **'Quake'** by iD Software, 22 June 1996.
2. **'Tomb Raider'** by iD, 22 November 1996.
3. **'MDK'** by Shiny Entertainment, 30 April 1997.
4. **'Dungeon Keeper'** by Bullfrog, 26 June 1997.
5. **'Unreal'** by Epic Games, 30 April 1998.

I thought all of these games were great and played on them loads but I'd found that installing them hadn't been straight forward, error messages were plenty, drivers needed updating etc. As I said, my PC soon became out of date and I quickly gave up buying PC games as I was never sure if they were actually going to work on it.

Original Nintendo 64 games bought as full price new releases:

(Title, developer, UK release date, *N64 magazine* issue number - overall score gained)

1. **'Super Mario 64'** by Nintendo, 1 March 1997, issue 1 from April 1997 – 96%.
2. **'Turok: Dinosaur Hunter'** by Acclaim Entertainment, 4 March 1997, issue 1 from April 1997 – 91%.
3. **'Shadows of the Empire'** by LucasArts, 1 March 1997, issue 1 from April 1997 – 78%.
4. **'Goldeneye'** by Rare, 25 August 1997, issue 9 from December 1997 – 94%.
5. **'Lylat Wars'** by Nintendo EAD, 20 October 1997, issue 8 from November 1997 – 91%.
6. **'Yoshi's Story'** by Nintendo EAD, 10 May 1998, issue 22 from February 1998 – 86%.
7. **'Banjo Kazooie'** by Rare, 17 July 1998, issue 18 from August 1998 – 92%.
8. **'Turok 2: Seeds of Evil'** by Acclaim Entertainment, 21 October 1998, issue 21 from November 1998 – 95%.
9. **'Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time'** by Nintendo EAD, 21, November 1998, issue 24 from January 1999 – 98%.
10. **'Rakugakids'** by Konami, 4 December 1998, issue 22 from December 1998 – 80%.
11. **'Star Wars: Rogue Squadron'** by Factor 5/LucasArts, December 1998, issue 25 from February 1999 – 85%.

12. **'Quake II'** by iD Software, 7 February 1999, issue 32 from September 1999 – 90%.
13. **'Shadowman'** by Acclaim Studios Teeside, 9 March 1999, issue 32 from September 1999 – 93%.
14. **'Star Wars Episode 1: Racer'** by LucasArts, June 1999, issue 30 from July 1999 – 88%.
15. **'Donkey Kong 64'** by Rare, 6 December 1999, issue 36 from Christmas 1999 – 93%.
16. **'Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask'** by Nintendo EAD, 17 November 2000, issue 49 from Christmas 2000 – 96%.

(*All developer details and release dates are from each title's relevant 'Wikipedia' page.)

All in all, I purchased sixteen brand new N64 games between 1997 and 2000. In the last year I was actively using the machine there was a gap of almost a whole year between the last two titles I bought. Again, I must have lost interest. Out of all of these, the only one I was able to finish without cheating was *'Yoshi's Story'* (a game made for 'younger players'). Since then though, I have persevered and managed to complete *'Quake 2'* a number of times (not too impressive to be honest, I have to set it to 'Easy' in order to progress!) I rarely enjoy fighting games but *'Rakuga Kids'* was something else. It was so bizarre, with its kid crayon-like graphics it actually made me laugh out loud on a couple of occasions. I still felt I was just mashing buttons randomly in order to beat the various opponents it threw at me though. *'Shadowman'* was another favourite and one of the most atmospheric N64 games ever. It made a change to have a game to play on the machine with a more adult theme. I didn't manage to get that far in it though, only scratching the surface of what that game contained. I tried again years later but got stuck pretty early on again! Pah!

Most of my N64 games had been purchased from the branch of GAME on Abington Street in Northampton. NHCC didn't sell N64 titles and I remember even Paul, the boss's son, couldn't get N64 titles cheaper from suppliers who supplied the computer shop, so he had to use GAME too to get his games, which just goes to illustrate the preposterousness of the situation NHCC itself faced. The odd title of mine was purchased from Toys 'R' Us as they had a sizeable selection of titles to choose from. A sad sign of the things to come there, I think, with the independent computer shops being entirely squeezed out the market by the bigger chain stores. A sad state of affairs! Luckily, I kept my N64 and all the games I bought and stored them in a box in the attic. It horrifies me now, but I ended up lending it to my sister so her three young sons could play on it. The result of that could have been catastrophic (I had visions of ripped or missing boxes, missing games and cartridges covered in the residue of sticky drinks and sweets!) but when I ended up asking for it back a few years later everything was still pretty much in the same condition as I'd given it to them in. Best of all, the collection had mysteriously acquired a copy of *'Resident Evil 2'* for the machine (albeit with the manual missing). That game now goes for a pretty penny on eBay, (a quick look at 'Sold Items' on eBay shows that a boxed copy in good nick can set you back anything between £150 to £500+, depending on condition. For a loose cartridge you'd be looking at a sum of around £80!) even if it does have the ropiest looking box out of all the games. A search by myself for a loose manual to go with the box and cartridge continues via eBay!

Original PlayStation 1 games bought as new releases & back catalogue:

(Title, developer, UK release date)

1. **'Tomb Raider'** by Core Design, 22 November 1996.
2. **'Tomb Raider II'** by Core Design, 31 October 1997.
3. **'Crash Bandicoot 2: Cortex Strikes Back'** by Naughty Dog, 6 December 1997.
4. **'Medievil'** by SCE Cambridge Studio, 1 October 1998.
5. **'Metal Gear Solid'** by Konami, 22 February 1999.

6. **'Silent Hill'** by Konami, 24 February 1999.
7. **'Final Fantasy VIII'** by Squaresoft, 27 October 1999.
8. **'Vagrant Story'** by Squaresoft, 10 February 2000.
9. **'Vib Ribbon'** by NanaOn-Sha, 1 September 2000.
10. **'Driver 2'** by Reflections Interactive, 17 November 2000.

Remember, I bought my PlayStation 1 quite a while after it had originally come out in the UK. I bought *'Metal Gear Solid'*, my first game, with my machine not long after that title had been released, so it was a newly released game. I then bought a few titles that had already been out for a while and were considered top titles. After *'Metal Gear Solid'* the rest of the games I bought were purchased not long after they had been released onto the market. Of all the games I've ever played over the years *'Vib Ribbon'* was one of the most bizarre!

THOSE WE LOST IN 1996 TO 2000:

Jon Pertwee – 20 May 1996.
Linda McCartney – 17 April 1998.
Dusty Springfield – 2 March 1999.
Stanley Kubrick – 7 March 1999.
Rod Hull – 17 March 1999.
Ernie Wise – 21 March 1999.
Oliver Reed – 2 May 1999.
Ian Dury – 27 March 2000.
Sir Alec Guinness – 5 August 2000.
Paula Yates – 17 September 2000.
Kirsty MacColl – 18 December 2000.

Chapter 22: 2001 to 2008

"Joffa Smiff? Lordy lord! I'm not worthy..."

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'Hannibal' – Ridley Scott, 9 February 2001.
- 'A.I. Artificial Intelligence' – Steven Spielberg, 29 June 2001.
- 'Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring' – Peter Jackson, 10 December 2001.
- '28 Days Later' – Danny Boyle, 1 November 2002.
- 'Kill Bill: Volume 1' – Quentin Tarantino, 10 October 2003.
- 'Elephant' – Gus Van Sant, 24 October 2003.
- 'The Passion of the Christ' – Mel Gibson, 25 February 2004.
- 'Dead Man's Shoes' – Shane Meadows, 1 October 2004.
- 'Batman Begins' – Christopher Nolan, 17 June 2005.
- 'Silent Hill' – Christophe Gans, April 2006.
- 'Apocolypto' – Mel Gibson, 8 December 2006.
- 'Beowulf' – Robert Zemeckis, 5 November 2007.
- 'No Country for Old Men' – Joel Coen/Ethan Coen, 9 November 2007.
- 'Happy-Go-Lucky' – Mike Leigh, 18 April 2008.
- 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' – Mark Herman, 12 September 2008.
- 'Changeling' – Clint Eastwood, 24 October 2008.

Before I carry on I'd just like to take some time to explain that these two next chapters are one of the reasons that the writing of this book has taken me so long to finish. I've found it very hard to write about this time, nearly twenty years in total. This is a period where I went from being the least interested in computer games to the most, almost back to 1986 levels! Up until 2009 my retro gaming consisted of the odd time when I'd fire up a ZX Spectrum emulator on my Mac computer, have a few goes then turn it off. Now that wouldn't be very interesting to read about would it? I was too busy trying to find a job after finishing university, falling mentally ill because I wasn't prepared for not being able to find one and going out on a Friday and Saturday night (and, on occasion, Sunday night as well) at 10pm and coming back at home at 5 in the morning. Plus, let's face it, the meat of the book is done and dusted. I just need to link the bulk of the book which you've just read to the last chapter (which is a separate download to this and was actually released before the main book) and bring you up to date. So if you don't mind, I'm going to skim over these years and only mention some of the major events that took place which relate to the subject matter of this book. If I don't do it this way then I'll never get this book finished (it's long enough as it is) and I've given myself until this coming Sunday (20 February 2022) to get it all down. On that day, in two days' time, whatever's not been written has to stay unwritten. Whatever it is, you're not missing much! (I missed that deadline. Hey ho! I actually finished it on the 28 February). So, let's carry on...

In the summer of 2002 my Graphic Design college course came to its end. I passed with a fair few Distinctions and Merits under my belt. I had rather enjoyed being back in a classroom again and didn't really want it to end. I had never contemplated going to university, before and now, at age 32, I realised that this would probably be my only chance to go. My frame of mind was in the right place. Back when I was a teenager the idea had never ever entered my head. As far I was concerned I'd finished with school and that was that. The years of flitting from one job to another soon changed that way of thinking and I applied to go to back up north and was accepted for a Higher National Diploma in Graphic Design at Salford University which would last for a further two years. I chose Salford as I wanted to move to live in or near a bigger town (that being the city of Manchester) and, as I'd lived up there before, I still knew the area pretty well. The thought of going to London never entered the equation. That was nice and jolly for a day trip but it was way too busy and smelly for me to actually want to live there permanently. Life in Northampton had grown a bit stale and there were a few bad memories now, hanging around like a stubborn wet fart. I, and others I knew, had all made a few silly and immature mistakes over the previous few years and things got a bit much. Quite a few of my circle of friends from the last four or five years also decided to move away at the same time. Jim decided to move up north with me as well so at least I wouldn't be completely on my own and I'd get some help actually moving too. Everyone else we knew who was also abandoning Northampton for a change of scenery went south. They had set

their sights on London and Brighton. We were the only two out of everyone to move up north.

Not long after moving up to Salford I bought myself a Nintendo Gamecube. The machine had already been out a while having been launched in the UK on 3 May 2002. I bought three titles along with my console, which were *'Pikmin'*, *'Super Mario Sunshine'* and *'Starfox Adventures'*. I didn't get that much into my Gamecube, for the reasons mentioned above, though I did end up buying a grand total of eight games for it. The machine was well looked after though and is still in sterling condition and has never malfunctioned! (So far!)

So, this is where the skimming over things starts. What happened that was of note over the next few years?

On Tuesday 8 March 2005 I went downstairs where Ocean Software had been situated in Central Street for the first time since 1991. It was totally surreal being down there again even though most of the inside had completely changed. All of the partitions that had divided up the desks and workstations had been ripped out and the various rooms had been divided up into sections that were being rented to small businesses. I couldn't even get into what had been Gary Bracey's office as there was a lock on the door! I did take a set of digital photos but, over the years, I ended up losing all but two of them, which annoyed me. I'm usually very good at backing up important files but I found that these had gone walkies. Maybe the disc I backed them up became unreadable and I threw it away once I realised?

At some point around this period I had a good look through my parent's attic as they still had a load of my belongings up there that I didn't take with me when I moved from Northampton to Salford. That day I made one the biggest mistakes I'd ever make. I ended up putting loads of old computer game magazines, including my entire *'N64'* magazine collection (which wasn't complete by any means but consisted of, at least, the first 25 issues), a heap of *'Your Computer'* magazines from 1983 and 1984 and, even worse and totally irreplaceable, my whole set of pirated tapes full of games for the ZX Spectrum that I'd made when I was a teenager, in bin bags for throwing out. I just thought "Oh there's no way I'll ever want to load any of those again!" and in the bin they went, along with my perfectly working Philips D6260 tape recorder (<https://tinyurl.com/3nvkbb8n>) which was easily the most reliable tape machine I ever used with my Spectrum. This was FORTY plus C60s and C90s full of Spectrum games from back in the 80s. Fortunately, four of those old pirate tapes had fallen into another box, so avoided the tape Armageddon. Luckily, I'd already transferred some early loading screens I'd drawn and BASIC programs I'd typed in to a digital format, so they were preserved. But who knows what else was tucked away on the ends of those tapes that disappeared forever when I took that bin bag down to Mum and Dad's dustbins! Sometimes it hits me. Those tapes, with the game titles all written on the inlays by own teenage hand, some of them which had a recording of my voice saying the title of each game before the code started (useful if you didn't have a tape counter), have gone FOREVER!

The April 2005 issue of *'Games TM'* magazine had the first (that I know of) major retrospective feature on Ocean Software in their *'Retro'* section. This part of the magazine was under the helm of Darran Jones who is the current editor of *'Retro Gamer'* magazine which has been going strong for a good few years now (and is the only national magazine I subscribe too nowadays). This massive eighteen page feature, called *'A Drop in the Ocean'*, featured interviews with myself (in print for the first time since the 1980s), Jon Ritman, John Lomax, Jonathan Smith and Simon Butler.

On Saturday 30 July 2005 we had an Ocean reunion in a bar in Central Street on the opposite side of the street where we used to work. In attendance was Lorraine Starr, John Meegan, Bill Harbison, Matthew Cannon, Stephen Thomson, Gary Bracey, Steve Lavache, Jayne Millar and some other staff who worked there after I'd left the job, so I didn't know them. It was my first ever staff reunion and the thing I remember the most was that we all just fell into it. It was amazing. It was literally like we hadn't seen each other for a few days and we were talking and joking about again like it was still 1988.

On Tuesday 20 September 2005 I met my favourite comedian in the world, Rik Mayall, at a book signing at Waterstones on Deansgate in Manchester. Rik had been my favourite character in my

favourite TV show back in the 80s in the BBC comedy *'The Young Ones'*. Series 1 had originally been broadcast in 1982, though I think that broadcast passed me by and I caught it all on a repeat run, on Thursday nights, the year after. A second series followed in 1984 and was just as funny and rude as the first. Honestly, *everyone* at school watched *'The Young Ones'*. The day after each episode had been shown we'd all be reciting choice lines (usually the rudest ones) from the previous night's show. I would record each one on a VHS tape (marked *'Do Not Tape Over!'*) and watch them over and over again for years! In fact, I still watch them all at least once every two years or so though my copies are now on DVD. I remember when I got to sit down next to Rik I said, "It's an honour to meet you Rik" and he replied, "It's an honour to meet you." I told him my name and he asked if *'Mark'* was spelt with a C or a K. He signed a copy of his new book *'Bigger than Hitler, Better than Christ'* which had just been published and I got a treasured photo of me with Rik. In it he has his head on my left shoulder and is giving the camera a big, fuck off, V sign! I was so starstruck at the time I look thoroughly bemused in the photograph. The meeting happened so quickly though as we were herded in and out as quickly as possible by an aide. The queue to meet him was huge, it went right round the block. It still, years later, feels like a dream. Thankfully, I have the photo to prove that it wasn't.

I still haven't, and probably never will, got over the fact that Rik Mayall died on 9 June 2014 due to a sudden heart attack after a morning jog. He was 56 years old. That's no age to go!
(<https://twitter.com/MarkRJones1970/status/873116692070637570>)

Issue 23 of *'Retro Gamer'* magazine from April 2006 contained a feature on Ocean Software called *'Life on the Ocean Waves'*. This eight page *'Developer Lookback'* contained comments by myself, Jonathan Smith, Brian Flanagan, Gary Bracey and Simon Butler.

In early 2007 one of my housemates bought himself the new Nintendo Wii console (released in Europe on 8 December 2006). The game that was played the most by us was the one that came with it in the box, *'Wii Sports'*. By the end of 2007 that title was the bestselling Wii game so far and by March 2021 had sold a staggering 82.90 million copies worldwide!

It was very strange, at first, to actually feel like you'd physically exerted yourself while playing a computer game in your own house due to the unique controllers that came with the machine. I bought a total of nine games for it myself before it got put away back in the box a few years later. Luckily, when my housemate moved out, he left the console and all the games, including the ones he bought, for it behind! Wahey!

The year after, in 2007, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a private message on the *'World of Spectrum'* forums:

"Hi Mark! How's it going! Jof."

My reply said it all:

"Joffa Smiff? Lordy lord! I'm not worthy! I'm good cheers, still in Manc'. How's things your end? Mark."

I told him about when I asked him for his autograph and he said he remembered some spotty oik shoving an Ocean comic under his nose in the pub one day back in 1987. We exchanged a few messages every now and again and Joffa filled me in on what he'd been up to over the last twenty years, at the end of which he said:

"Don't you dare tell anyone any of all this!"

I did actually become a bit concerned for him at one point, he was saying some slightly odd things, but he told me not to worry:

"I sound so down - but I'm really not!"

He sent me link to the video of *'Nice Weather for Ducks'* by a band called Lemon Jelly, a song he liked (<https://youtu.be/Kihhcgkxgck>). I was already aware of it, it's a song I loved when it came

out, and I can see why the video would have appealed to Joffa. It's very weird and wonderful.

In 2008 we conversed via the forum again. I was going through a rough patch at the time. Joffa replied:

"That sounds like a cry for help! Super Jof to the rescue! Everything is fine here. What's up mate? Lay it on thick! Job? Love? Gerbils? If you have your health then things can't be too bad! [citation needed] (oh, piss off mum - stop reading my e-mails! I'll call the police. Again!) Jof."

I asked him if he thought it was strange that people still knew him now for work he did two decades ago:

"...it does surprise me sometimes - because I more or less stayed out of the PR limelight at the time, and even now rarely use my real name for anything (but then, with a name like 'John Smith' you have to do something to get noticed/unnoticed. I blame the parents)!"

We spoke about the 'Crash' review of his conversion of 'Hyper Sports' which I'd just been reading while I had been sat in the bath:

"I remember that review - my 1st Crash Smash! A year out of school and I've gotten my name in the mag every one of my mates read! Woo! Anyway - you didn't do too bad in the fame department! Jof."

The messages from Joffa continued in to 2009, sometimes they were completely random:

"I love the word "shall". And you used it twice. I also like the word "sharn't". And that's the 1st time I've ever used it. Jof."

Original Nintendo Gamecube games bought as full price new releases:

(Title, developer, UK release date)

1. **'Pikmin'** by Nintendo, 26 October 2001 – £24.97.
2. **'Super Mario Sunshine'** by Nintendo, 26 August 2002 – £34.97.
3. **'Starfox Adventures'** by Rare, 23 September 2002 – £29.99.
4. **'Medal of Honour Frontline'** by EA Games, 29 May 2002.
5. **'Eternal Darkness Sanity's Requiem'** by Silicon Knights, 24 June 2002.
6. **'The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker'** by Nintendo, 3 May 2003.
7. **'Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King'** by EA Games, 31 October 2003.
8. **'Mario Kart: Double Dash'** by Nintendo, 7 November 2003.

These first three titles were bought with my machine (which cost £129.99) from GAME in the Arndale in Manchester, along with a 16-mb memory card (£19.99), on Saturday 30 November 2002. Total paid = £239.91.

Original Nintendo Wii games bought as full price new releases:

(Title, developer, UK release date)

1. **'Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess'** by Nintendo EAD, rel. 8 December 2006.
2. **'Call of Duty 3'** by Activision, rel. 8 December 2006.
3. **'Warioware Smooth Moves'** by Nintendo SPD/Intelligent Systems, rel.12 January 2007.

4. **'Big Brain Academy'** by Nintendo, rel. 20 July 2007.
5. **'Super Mario Galaxy'** by Nintendo EAD Tokyo, rel. 16 November 2007.
6. **'Bully Scholarship Edition'** by Rockstar, rel. 4 March 2008.

THOSE WE LOST IN 2001 TO 2008:

George Harrison – 29 November 2001.
Christopher Reeve – 10 October 2004.
George Best – 25 November 2005.
Syd Barrett – 7 July 2006.
Arthur Lee – 3 August 2006.
John Inman – 8 March 2007.
Evel Knievel – 30 November 2007.
Maharishi Mahesh Yogi – 5 February 2008.
Roy Scheider – 10 February 2008.
Sir Arthur C. Clarke – 19 March 2008.
Richard Wright – 15 September 2008.

Chapter 23: 2009 to 2019

“...the *'Dingo'* loading screen proved to be one of my best.”

FILMS

(Title, director and release date)

- 'Avatar' – Steven Spielberg, 10 December 2009.
- 'Troll Hunter' – André Øvredal, 29 October 2010.
- 'Drive' – Nicolas Winding Refn, 16 September 2011.
- 'The Woman in Black' – James Watkins, 10 February 2012.
- 'Prometheus' – Ridley Scott, 8 June 2012.
- 'Sightseers' – Ben Wheatley, 30 November 2012.
- 'The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey' – Peter Jackson, 14 December 2012.
- 'Gravity' – Alfonso Cuarón, 7 November 2013.
- 'Under the Skin' – Jonathan Glazer, 14 March 2014.
- 'Babadook' – Jennifer Kent, 22 May 2014.
- 'Ex Machina' – Alex Garland, 21 January 2015.
- 'It Follows' – David Robert Mitchell, 13 March 2015.
- 'The Revenant' - Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 25 December 2015.
- 'Hunt for the Wilderpeople' – Taika Waititi, 31 March 2016.
- 'Hacksaw Ridge' – Mel Gibson, 4 November 2016.
- 'Alien: Covenant' – Ridley Scott, 12 May 2017.
- 'Baby Driver' – Edgar Wright, 28 June 2017.
- 'Ready Player One' – Steven Spielberg, 29 March 2018.
- 'Black Mirror: Bandersnatch' – David Slade, 28 December 2018.
- 'Once Upon a Time in Hollywood' – Quentin Tarantino, 14 August 2019.
- 'Joker' – Todd Phillips, 4 October 2019.

The *'Byte Back'* retro gaming event that took place on 7-8 March 2009 at Bidds Live Music Club in Stoke-on-Trent was the first retro gaming event that I ever attended. Me and my other half, Phil, went for just the first day, the Saturday, as myself, Simon Butler, Jim Bagley and Jonathan Smith had been asked to participate in an Ocean Q&A session, hosted by Matt Corne. This was going to be the first time anyone had the opportunity to hear Joffa talk about the old days and the audience was going to have a rare opportunity to ask him questions afterwards. There was a lot of excitement and a buzz in the air because Joffa was going to make this special appearance.

It was here that I got to meet Ocean artwork maestro Bob Wakelin for the very first time. Bob rarely visited 6 Central Street back in the 80s and, when he did venture in, he rarely, if ever, came downstairs where we artists and programmers were beavering away. For years none of us working at Ocean even knew what he looked like. We met Anna Bäckström and David East of *'The Attic Bug'*, who were currently selling items utilising Bob's artwork, for the very first time too. They had a table set up for their items for sale and we ended up being good friends with them. It was here that Bob gave me a huge, signed print of his *'Wizball'* artwork, which has been hanging up in my living room ever since.

I have the dubious responsibility of being the person who invited Joffa to take part in this *'Byte-Back'* talk. Lots of people are aware of what happened on that day. If you don't then the short version is that Joffa had a fear of crowds and became racked with anxiety when faced with having to go on to the stage. In order to try and combat this he took some illicit substances just before we were due to appear. First, he vanished and we couldn't find him. Once he reappeared he promptly entered the stage too early and collapsed in front of everyone who was waiting for the talk to start. He then spent the first half of the talk asleep then, as the effects of whatever he'd taken started to wear off, started to mumble nonsensical things while we were trying to answer the questions we were being asked. It was a terribly difficult and sad situation we found ourselves in. Thing is, he seemed to be genuinely looking forward to it during the run up and we spoke about it quite a lot. When I initially invited him he said:

"Yeah, sounds good! Count me in!... Thank you for what you are doing. I'm in a shit hole and you are digging me out. I'll pay you back one day. Jof."

As we arrived at the event it was evident to me, Simon Butler & Jim Bagley that Joffa wasn't feeling too great and that his social phobia had gotten the better of him. Even afterwards, when I wanted to check he was okay, he seemed cheery about it all:

"That was great what you did! Really good to see you again! I'm always here, if you need to avoid me! Jof."

Then I got a message I didn't really understand:

"Don't ever change! Jof."

I asked him what he meant and he said:

"Well, just that. Most people change over time, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worst - for whatever reasons. Just don't change. That's not an order or a demand. Jof."

He never did really explain to me what that was supposed to mean but I can only guess that maybe Joffa realised that on that Saturday in March we all had to take turns looking after him, and that I, being the one responsible for driving him to and from Oxford Road train station in Manchester, was put under more pressure than I should have been. It's a great shame that all happened. My partner Phil filmed the whole event and I initially put it all on YouTube so that all the people who couldn't attend could watch it. I thought that I shouldn't let that one calamity ruin the whole event. It stayed on there, for a while at least.

So, this is where my current interest in retro gaming started really. Don't get me wrong, over the years I'd still fired up the old Spectrum game every now and again on my PC, but I'd never bought anything old in order to fill gaps in my collection. I started looking at what I still had, worked out what I had lost (or sold!), gathered back the bits I had lent out and looked at what bits were missing.

'Videogame Nation', held at the Urbis in Manchester, was a retro gaming exhibition that ran from the 14 May to 20 September 2009. I was contacted by David Crookes and Pollyanna Clayton-Stamm, who were putting an exhibition together about the history of computer games, and they wanted to see if they could borrow a load of my collection for display purposes. This was huge for me. I was soon to see all those odd bits of paper and posters I'd saved from Ocean, various Spectrum and SNES games and my 'Crash' collection (framed and on the wall along where people queued to get in) on display at a major venue slap bang in the middle of Manchester city centre. I attended the preview that was held on Tuesday 12 May and it was surreal seeing all my various bits and pieces on display in glass cabinets. Once the exhibition was over I managed to get everything back, eventually, bar an Ocean Software poster for 'Donkey Kong', that I'd had since 1987. Someone had obviously taken a fancy to it and took it for themselves!

On Saturday 26 June 2010 Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith passed away. I had no idea Joffa was even ill. I'd missed the thread on the 'World of Spectrum' forum about him being admitted to hospital as it was in a section of it I didn't usually read. The day before the ex-Ocean staffers who were on Facebook were sent a message from Paul Hughes saying that Joffa had taken a turn for the worse and that he was fading fast. I was flabbergasted. Everyone was. By 10:30 on Saturday morning he had gone. Joffa certainly made his mark. He left behind a collection of titles that will live on for as long as people are still playing those old Spectrum games. Back in the day he was up there with the Ultimate team, Steve Crow, Steve Turner, Jon Ritman and the cream of ZX Spectrum games programmers. He was one of the few people in the industry that produced everything themselves. Sound, code & graphics. A one man shebang! His pioneering 'Plip-Plop' sound routine, where the Spectrum magically appeared to be able to play drums as well as a tune, was copied by all and sundry. When he said to me:

"Thank you for what you are doing. I'm in a shit hole and you are digging me out. I'll pay you back one day. Jof."

I immediately thought:

"You don't have to pay me back; you've already done by that by writing all those games I spent hours playing when I was a kid!"

I should have told him that. I didn't. When I wrote on my Facebook profile that Joffa had passed, my cousin Hayden, who has no real interest in retro gaming, wrote:

"I remember all those good times thanks to him."

Now, to be remembered over twenty years later by someone who probably hasn't even come across his name since the late eighties, surely meant that he left a lasting impression on thousands of 30 to 40 year olds who spent many hours of their childhoods playing the first generation of computer games. Now that's something special. It was at this point I decided to take down the videos I had uploaded of the 'Byte Back' event. It didn't really show Joffa in a good light and didn't want that to be what people saw if they did an internet search for him in the years to come. I still have it though, on a DVD on my shelf at home. It's a hard watch though and not very pleasurable to sit through.

At the 'Replay' event held at Norbreck Castle, Blackpool on Saturday 6 November 2010 another Ocean Software talk took place and was hosted by Andrew Fisher. Taking part was myself, Gary Bracey, Simon Butler and Jim Bagley. Anna Bäckström and David East of 'The Attic Bug' had set up an impressive looking Ocean room along with a tribute to Joffa.

At the end of January 2011 I decided to gather up all the old gaming bits I had in various places, put it all in one place and set up a Retro Gaming room. I started looking at my collection in detail, working out what bits I didn't have that I wanted (mainly gaps in my ZX Spectrum and Nintendo 64 games collections) and getting rid of a loads of doubles that I had in order to put the money gained towards getting the stuff I didn't have. I realised I had three or four copies of some Spectrum titles, gathered when I was picking stuff from customer's part-exchanges who were upgrading to a 16-bit machine while working at Serv-U. I didn't need that many so on eBay they went to fund some of the bits I wanted to buy. I also had to try and remember what 16-bit originals I had as I had sold my complete collection back in 1992. I wanted to get it *all* back, everything I ever owned and then all the bits I wanted to own but couldn't afford at the time. At first, my Retro Gaming room was set up in my tiny box room but, once my lodger had moved out, it was soon expanded to the back bedroom, which was nearly twice the size. The room remains a work in-progress though I rarely add to it anymore, it's nearly full to the brim and I have most of what I want. I do now feel that I have a museum/recreation of NHCC in my house. Sometimes, I just love going in and having a good look about. I don't even have to get a game going to enjoy it.

In 2011 I was contacted by a programmer called Søren Borgquist and was looking for an artist for a project he had in mind. Søren was big fan of Ultimate Play the Game and had been looking at some of the arcade games Chris and Tim Stamper had written before their Spectrum days. They produced a number of titles and 'The Pit' (discovered recently to possibly be the Stamper's very first published work), 'Blue Print', 'Wizz Quiz', 'Checkman', 'Grasspin', 'Saturn' and 'Dingo' were among them. The last title, 'Dingo', had caught Søren's eye and he was looking to make a ZX Spectrum version of this title that had come out in arcades in 1983 from Jaleco Ltd. He was aware of my previous work and was wondering if I wanted to be involved. I had never played 'Dingo' before so I fired up my MAME emulator, found the game in the huge list of games and had a bit of a play. I thought it would translate well to the Spectrum and the thought of producing graphics that looked like something Ultimate would have made around 1983 was too much to pass up. I quickly agreed to do the graphics and work commenced. I didn't think it would take me very long. The game only had one screen being a maze type game. The player controls Big Ted who runs around the maze collecting fruit while avoiding the vicious Dingo dogs. They bite should you run into them but they also pick up and throw fruit at you. Get bitten or splatted and you lose a life. Big Ted also has the ability to throw the last fruit he picked up back at the Dingo's. It's just a high-score game but a fun one at that. I thought I could make the game look a bit like 'Sabre Wulf' and had hoped, that once completed, could almost be a missing Ultimate game from 1983, sitting somewhere in-

between *'Jet Pac'* and *'Atic Atac'*.

Work progressed pretty quickly on *'Dingo'* and, finding that I'd produced all the main game graphics so much quicker than I'd anticipated, volunteered to try and produce some usable tunes using the old *'Wham! The Music Box'* utility, just like I had back in 1987 for *'Arkanoid'*. It took a few goes before I remembered how to use it but, eventually, I came up with some decent enough tunes that were put into the game. Søren was still hard at work coding *'Dingo'* and I was at a loose end so I said I'd like to try and come up with an illustration for use as the game's cover. I'd never done this before and, while I don't profess to be anywhere near as good at game artwork in the class of Bob Wakelin or Oliver Frey, thought I could come up with something that may have been good enough to use if we were still stuck in 1983! I was also aware that my loading screens always turn out looking much better if I have an image source to use and the time to start on that was looming. I was a bit worried. The previous loading screen I'd drawn had been for Ocean's *'Total Recall'* way back in 1991, a whole twenty years ago! I had no idea if I could still do it. Was having the ability to draw Spectrum loading screens something you could forget? Or was it like riding a bike? Once you got back in the saddle did you just remember how to do it? I was soon to find out. After a few false starts the *'Dingo'* loading screen proved to be one of my best. I worked really hard on it and would have been gutted if it hadn't turned out well. I had a reputation to uphold! Once the game was finished it and was out there it was very well received. *'Dingo'* was launched at the *'Replay'* retro game show that took place in Blackpool on the 5 and 6 November 2011. We couldn't have hoped for a better reaction from retro gamers. I had made a batch of physical tapes along with a printed inlay (which me and Søren had signed on a special tin foil window) and they all sold out almost straight away. People loved being able to buy a new game for the ZX Spectrum! It was here that I met Roger Kean and Oliver Frey (from Newsfield, creators of *'Crash'*, *'Zzap!64'*, *'Amtix'* and *'The Games Machine'* magazines) for the first time. Even though I'd never met them before it really felt like I was meeting old friends I hadn't seen for years. We got on very well and am now proud to be able to call them both my friends in real life.

'Dingo' at *'Spectrum Computing'*:

<https://spectrumcomputing.co.uk/entry/27162/ZX-Spectrum/Dingo>

'Dingo' at *'World of Spectrum'*:

<https://worldofspectrum.org/archive/software/games/dingo-tardis-remakes>

'Retro Gamer' magazine printed a two page feature on the making of *'Dingo'* in issue 96 which included an interview with myself and Søren. Two issues later, issue 98, saw the game get a glowing review from Jason Kelk, who ran the *'Homebrew'* section. He awarded the game 91% and it earned a *'Retro Gamer Sizzler'* stamp!

On Thursday 23 February 2012 I took my first trip to see Roger Kean and Oliver Frey at their home in Ludlow. It went really well and felt like I was visiting friends I'd known for years. They really are a lovely people. Their house is amazing and covered in examples of Oli's original art. I remember using their loo and, right in front of me, was the original artwork for the surfer cover of *'Crash'* issue (issue 19, August 1985). It was bizarre seeing the original source for an image I'd known since I was 15 years old hanging on the wall.

Issue 100 of *'Retro Gamer'* magazine, from March 2012, features a whole page devoted to me in their *'A Moment With...'* feature where I answered various retro gaming questions.

The very next issue of *'Retro Gamer'*, 101 from April 2012 features Bob's art for *'The Great Escape'* on the cover and contains a massive twelve page article, the biggest one yet, called *'A Life on the Ocean Wave'*. I was interviewed for it as well as Paul Hughes, Simon Butler, James Higgins, Bill Harbison, Gary Bracey, Jon Woods and Bob Wakelin.

Allan Shortt, who was a Commodore 64 coder for Ocean during its glory years in the late eighties, died on the morning of 25 September 2012. Allan was already working on his second title, *'Mario Bros'*, when I started at Ocean in February 1987. He had completed his first title *'Yie Ar Kung Fu II'* for the company, previously. He went on to work on *'Arkanoid II - Revenge of Doh'*, *'Athena'* and *'Combat School'* all on the Commodore 64. I will always remember Allan for his dry sense of humour. Gary Bracey paid tribute by saying:

"Although I hadn't spoken to Al for a number of years, we did stay in touch via email and I'd like to think we remained friends beyond the Ocean years. This comes as a terrible - and painful - shock. I will remember him as a gruff, no-nonsense guy with an intimidating exterior but a good, loyal heart within. He loved his job and was passionate about his work. One-of-a-kind, I'm sure he will be greatly missed by his family and everyone else whose life he touched. I am privileged to be counted among the latter. RIP, mate."

'Retro Fusion' magazine features a five page article written by myself about my time at Ocean Software. Part 1 was printed in issue 3 from the end of 2012. Part 2 (another five pages) then followed in issue 4, printed in 2013.

Issue 132 of 'GamesTM' magazine, from February 2013, features a photo of myself (page 141) in my games room holding up my copy of 'Ultimate Play the Game: The Collected Works' by Ultimate/U.S.Gold in their 'Collector's Corner' feature.

'Revival', Wolverhampton, occurred on Sunday 19 May 2013. Here, myself and ex-staffers took part in another Ocean Q&A session. Included was myself, Colin Porch, Rick Palmer, John Palmer, Stephen Thomson, Jim Bagley and Simon Butler. Some of these people I hadn't seen since I left Ocean back in the 80s and it was wonderful to catch up with old friends. Simon Butler and myself were also filmed answering questions about our time working at Ocean for a documentary called '1UP', a film written and directed by Dan Williams, about the rise of retro video games in recent years. (On line here: https://youtu.be/iPQvZ_Z1F-A – our sections occur at 3:39, 7:55, 10:26, 12:27 and 14:41).

On Sunday 12 October 2013 a second, un-official, Ocean reunion took place at 'Play Expo' in Manchester. In attendance was myself, Dawn Hollywood, Simon Butler, Bob Wakelin, Stephen Thomson, Paul Hughes, Jim Bagley, Steve Wahid, Bill Harbison and Lee Cowley. Again, it was great to see everyone but I hadn't seen Dawn (known as Dawn Drake back in the Ocean days) and Steve Wahid since the 80s so it was particularly fantastic to see those. As before, we all chatted away like we had only seen each other a few days before.

'The History of Ocean Software' book by Fusion Retro Books was launched at 'Revival Mini' event, Kenilworth on Saturday 7 December 2013. In attendance was myself, David and Anna, Gary Bracey, Roger Kean, Bob Wakelin, Simon Butler, Paul Owens, Dawn Hollywood, Paul Hughes, Stephen Thomson and Jim Bagley. A short video of us proposing a toast followed by a short speech by Gary Bracey is online here: <https://youtu.be/hSKXMhkbi-k> (It's pretty poor quality though and shows how much phone cameras have improved since 2013!) I was heavily involved in the production of this book. It uses a lot of photos of my own collection and an interview with myself was included.

In December 2013 'Pix'N Love #24' magazine features a ten page article (in French) on the making of 'Gryzor' on the ZX Spectrum which includes an interview with myself.

<https://www.editionspixnlove.com/pix-n-love-le-mook/634-pix-n-love-24.html>

On Saturday 9 August 2014 at the 'Revival' event in Wolverhampton an Ocean talk occurred. Paul Owens, Matthew Cannon, Philip Trelford, myself, Simon Butler and Jim Bagley took part in a Q&A about our time at the company. Bob Wakelin also there on his stand selling posters and prints. Whilst here Simon and I were interviewed talking together by Andy Remic for the 'Memoirs of a Spectrum Addict' film. During the day we were all badgered to sign copies of the new Ocean book. I don't think I've signed more autographs in one day than I did during this one.

Over the next few years I did some more ZX Spectrum work when time allowed. In 2014 I created loading screens for two of my favourite ever games – 'The Legend of Avalon' and 'Dragontorc'. I was always felt a bit disappointed that these brilliant, atmospheric games had been released by Hewson Consultants in 1984 without loading screens. So I set about correcting that and produced a loading screen each for them and tried my best to come up with something that did these amazing games justice. They eventually got the thumbs up from author Steve Turner which

pleased me no end. Another screen followed for another favourite – *'Tir Na Nog'*. Originally, that game did come with a simple loading screen but I decided to create one based on the actual cover art. Again, I was very happy with how it turned out.

The May 2015 issue of *'GamesTM'* magazine (issue 161) features a ten page feature called *'The Retro Guide to Ocean'*. It contains a detailed look back at some of their games and interviews with myself, Simon Butler and Ivan Horn.

The July 2015 issue of *'GamesTM'* magazine (issue 163) features an eight page feature called *'The Retro Guide to Ocean'*. It also contains a detailed look back at some of their games and interviews with Jim Bagley, Bruce Everiss and myself (illustrated with a photo of me in Liverpool's Cavern Club).

In January 2016 *'Retro Gamer'* celebrated reaching 150 issues by getting game industry veterans to name their *'150 Greatest Games Ever'*. I was asked to choose my favourite game, which I decided was the N64 title, *'The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time'*, which came in at number two. A double page spread featured me gushing about the game and a mugshot of myself.

On Thursday 6 August 2015 another Ocean talk took place at the *'Play It'* exhibition in Manchester, held at the *'Museum of Science & Industry'*. Ex-staffers Jim Bagley, Simon Cobb, myself, Stephen Thomson & Simon Butler took part in a Q&A session. The organisers had made and displayed the largest Ocean logo banner that I've ever seen in my life!

At the start of August 2016 Simon Butler and I were recorded in conversation by Mike James in my cosy retro games room talking about everything retro and more. This was included in the *'Retro Gaming Roundup 106 Podcast'*. You can listen to that here (starts at 31:20):

https://www.retrogamingroundup.com/shownotes/2016/roundup106_2016.08.php

'An Evening with Ocean' at the Centre for Computing History in Cambridge took place on Saturday 13 May 2016. It was hosted by Mike James of the *'Retrogaming RoundUp'* podcast. Me, Stephen Thomson and Simon Butler did a *'Room 101'* talk/game show type thing. Jenny Spires, who was Pink Floyd founder Syd Barrett's girlfriend for some of the 1960s and is a friend of mine, also turned up to see us. The whole 90 minutes can be seen here: **<https://youtu.be/kR3Gd4-8nnY>**

On Sunday 29 January, 2017 Cliftonville Middle School mate Adrian Singh releases his hack of the scrapped *'Total Recall'* that I worked on at Active Minds. A rolling demo of this version was released on a tape that came on the cover of *'Micro Hobby'* magazine, a Spanish Spectrum magazine, in 1991. The previously uncontrollable demo is now controllable thanks to Adrian who worked on the code contained in the demo to enable the keyboard. Amazingly, this is the first piece of hacking he has done for at least twenty seven years. It explodes on social media. For a look at this hacked version I made a video: **<https://youtu.be/Sa6qT4rozSY>**

On Saturday 15 July 2017 I attend *'Play Expo Blackpool'*. While there I bump into my old Ocean boss Gary Bracey and Ocean Commodore 64 coder David Blake. I hadn't seen or spoken to David since 1988! Sadly, this was the last show that Bob Wakelin attended, along with David and Anna of *'The Attic Bug'* and Jim Bagley (coder at Special FX in the 80s). During the event we stood outside the front on the venue in the sun chatting for about half an hour. Bob told me - which made the whole weekend worthwhile - that plans were in place for him to start producing new art for various Spectrum Next games. I was so excited, I had to make sure I hadn't misheard him. He replied, "Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it actually. It's been so long since I've done anything like that." Sadly, it was not to be. I did get to spend some more time with Bob though. Not long after, I got to visit him at his house in Liverpool one Saturday afternoon with David East. Bob was going through his Ocean artwork folders and deciding which ones were selling at the shows and which ones people weren't interested in. While going through his old work he regaled us with anecdotes about how they were made. It was fascinating to listen to him tell his stories. That was the last time I ever saw him. He passed away on 20 January 2018.

<https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-01-28-the-airbrush-is-mightier-than-the-sword-remembering-bob-wakelin>

On Sunday 15 October 2017 *'Play Expo Manchester'* takes place. One of the planned events is a *'Memoirs of a Spectrum Addict'* talk with myself, Jim Bagley, Richard Stevenson, Andy Spencer, Andrew Hewson, Mark Howlett ('Lord Arse'), the film maker Andy Remic and Steve Turner.

On Saturday 27 October 2018 I bumped into ex-Ocean musician Gari Biasillo at *'Play Expo'*, Blackpool. He currently lives in Japan and had been over in the UK visiting his family. As with David Blake, I hadn't seen him either since 1988.

Issue 192 of *'Retro Gamer'* from the end of March 2019 featured my biggest and best printed magazine achievement to date. I was asked by the editor, Darran Jones, if I would write an article about my first few weeks working at Ocean Software. The finished piece was called *'Ocean. Head Above Water: My first month at Ocean Software'* and ran for six pages. I had never written a complete article myself for a nationally available magazine. Previously, I'd just been interviewed and someone else had written the text. The completed article looked great and used many of my own photos and items I had saved from Ocean back in the day. I was really chuffed and immensely proud at how well it had all turned out.

On Saturday 4 May 2019 I attended *'Play Expo'* in Manchester, mainly to see the talk *'Manic Miner'* and *'Jet Set Willy'* author Matthew Smith was giving. It was very interesting hearing him talk about the making of those two games. At the end I managed to get a copy of *'Manic Miner'* signed by him, even though it does look like he signed it three times, all on top of each other and at different angles! (My autograph: <https://twitter.com/MarkRJones1970/status/1124741427391606784> and the talk itself: <https://youtu.be/ERve4p7Sgw8>).

Original Nintendo Wii games bought as full price new releases:

(Title, developer, UK release date)

1. **'Ghostbusters'** by Terminal Reality/Red Fly Studio, rel. 16 June 2009.
2. **'Beatles Rockband'** by Pi Studios, rel. 9 September 2009.
3. **'Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword'** by Nintendo EAD, rel. 18 November 2011.

THOSE WE LOST IN 2009 TO 2019:

Michael Jackson – 25 June 2009.
Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith (Ocean Software games author) – 26 June 2010.
Whitney Houston – 11 February 2012.
Rik Mayall – 9 June 2014.
David Bowie – 10 January 2016.
Prince – 21 April 2016.
John Hurt – 25 January 2017.
Chuck Berry – 18 March 2017.
Roger Moore – 23 May 2017.
Keith Chegwin – 11 December 2017.
Ken Dodd – 12 March 2018.
Jim Bowen – 14 March 2018.
Leslie Grantham – 15 June 2018.
Aretha Franklin – 16 August 2018.
Geoffrey Hayes – 1 October 2018.
Peter Tork – 21 February 2019.
Rutger Hauer – 19 July 2019.
Peter Sissons – 1 October 2019.
Clive James – 24 November 2019.

Chapter 24: 'Starquake II' high score table answers (see page 204)

- | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 01. Eldritch – <i>'Heartland'</i> | <i>'The Lord of The Rings'</i> | <i>'Doomsday Castle'</i> |
| 02. Bounty Bob – <i>'Bounty Bob Strikes Back'</i> | 37. Bilbo – as previous | 70. Dandy – obvious |
| 03. Willy – <i>'Jet Set Willy'</i> | 38. Pedro – obvious | 71. Rasputin – obvious |
| 04. Fred – obvious | 39. Monty Mole – obvious | 72. Bub – <i>'Bubble Bobble'</i> |
| 05. Wally – <i>'Automania'</i> plus sequels | 40. Percy – <i>'Percy the Potty Pigeon'</i> | 73. Bob – as previous |
| 06. Bugaboo – obvious | 41. Cúchulainn – <i>'Tir Na Nog' / 'Dun Darach'</i> | 74. Roland – <i>'Roland's Rat Race'</i> |
| 07. Jetman – <i>'Lunar Jetman'</i> | 42. Sweevo – <i>'Sweevo's World'</i> | 75. Kevin – as previous |
| 08. Sabreman – <i>'Sabre Wulf'</i> plus sequels | 43. Ted – <i>'Technician Ted'</i> | 76. Bobby – <i>'Bobby Bearing'</i> |
| 09. Robbie – <i>'Pssst'</i> | 44. Beaky – <i>'Beaky and the Egg Snatchers'</i> | 77. Rockford – <i>'Boulderdash' / 'Rockford's Riot'</i> |
| 10. Charlie – <i>'Nodes of Yesod' & 'Arc of Yesod'</i> | 45. Kanga – <i>'Kosmic Kanga'</i> | 78. Gulpman – obvious |
| 11. Blagger – <i>'Son of Blagger'</i> | 46. Jack – <i>'Jack & the Beanstalk'</i> | 79. Pi-Man – <i>'Pimania' / 'Pi-Eyed' / 'Pi-Balled' / 'Olympimania'</i> |
| 12. Ziggy – <i>'Pyramid' & 'Doomsday Castle'</i> | 47. Charlemagne – <i>'Nodes of Yesod' / 'Arc of Yesod'</i> | 80. Zoot – obvious |
| 13. Horace – <i>'Hungry Horace'</i> plus sequels | 48. Chuckie – <i>'Chuckie Egg'</i> | 81. N.O.M.A.D – obvious |
| 14. B.C. – <i>'B.C.'s Quest for Tires'</i> | 49. B.C. Bill – obvious | 82. Wartoad – <i>'Cosmic Wartoad'</i> |
| 15. Wilf – <i>'Kokotoni Wilf'</i> | 50. Dan – <i>'Dynamite Dan'</i> | 83. Zub – obvious |
| 16. Quasi – <i>'Hunchback' & sequels</i> | 51. Head – <i>'Head Over Heels'</i> | 84. Starman Jones – <i>'Universal Hero'</i> |
| 17. Gilligan – <i>'Gilligan's Gold'</i> | 52. Heels – as previous | 85. Mr Weems – <i>'Mr Weems and the She Vampires'</i> |
| 18. Martha – <i>'Mad Martha' & sequel</i> | 53. Lazy Jones – obvious | 86. Flunky – obvious |
| 19. Mugsy – obvious | 54. Fat Worm – <i>'Fat Worm Blows a Sparky'</i> | 87. Mervyn – ? |
| 20. Sir Lancelot – obvious | 55. Isvar – <i>'Fairlight'</i> | 88. Hasrinaxx – <i>'Druid'</i> |
| 21. Trashman – obvious | 56. Maroc – <i>'The Legend of Avalon' / 'Dragontorc'</i> | 89. Kong – obvious |
| 22. Jasper – obvious | 57. Morag Shapeshifter – <i>'Dragontorc'</i> | 90. Odin – <i>'Valhalla'</i> |
| 23. Luxor – <i>'Lords of Midnight' & sequel</i> | 58. Wiggler – obvious | 91. Loki – as previous |
| 24. Morkin – as previous | 59. Mrs Mopp – obvious | 92. Mary – as previous |
| 25. Doomdark – as previous | 60. Boni – <i>'Trap Door'</i> | 93. Meena – ? |
| 26. Zark – as previous | 61. Berk – as previous | 94. Genghis – <i>'The Great Space Race'</i> |
| 27. Sevrina – <i>'Shadowfire'</i> | 62. Drutt – as previous | 95. Haberdaber – as previous |
| 28. Syllk – as previous | 63. Mat – <i>'Codename Mat'</i> | 96. Eddie – <i>'Eskimo Eddie'</i> |
| 29. Torik – as previous | 64. Bogul – <i>'Corridors of Genon'</i> | 97. Pogo – obvious |
| 30. Maul – as previous | 65. Gumphrey – <i>'Grumpy Gumphrey Supersleuth'</i> | 98. Scooby – <i>'Scooby Doo'</i> |
| 31. B.L.O.B – as previous | 66. Bounder – obvious | 99. Shaggy – as previous |
| 32. Zirky – <i>'Factory Breakout'</i> | 67. Sam Stoat – <i>'Sam Stoat Safe Breaker'</i> | 100. Dr. Jones – <i>'Jet Set Willy'</i> |
| 33. Sir Galaheart – <i>'Firelord'</i> | 68. Brian Skywalker – <i>'Tribble Trouble'</i> | 101. Maria – as previous |
| 34. Wizball – obvious | 69. Zippy – <i>'The Pyramid' /</i> | 102. Orestes – <i>'Gift from the Gods'</i> |
| 35. Max – <i>'Mag Max'</i> | | |
| 36. Gandalf – <i>'The Hobbit' /</i> | | |

A standalone 50 page and illustrated pdf called
***'Diary on the making of 'Mr. Do!' for the
48k/128k ZX Spectrum –
February 2017 to June 2019'***
is available to download from here:

<https://tinyurl.com/5xtrn9c9>

This serves as a bonus
final chapter for this book.

Chapter 25: Links that might interest you.

My 'ZX Art' page: <https://zxart.ee/eng/authors/m/mark-r-jones/#>

My Ocean Software Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/OceanSoftwareLtd/>

My Ultimate Play The Game Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/ultimateptg>

'Spectrum Computing' page: https://spectrumcomputing.co.uk/list?label_id=9222

'World of Spectrum' page: <https://worldofspectrum.org/archive/people/mark-r-jones>

Information and pictures on 'Flood 2': <https://www.gamesthatwerent.com/2010/09/flood-2/>

Information and pictures on 'Starquake 2' and 'Caspar the Ironlord' and others on the Atari ST: <https://www.gamesthatwerent.com/2014/07/st-protos-recovered-from-mark-r-jones-disks/>

Let me show you around the outside of 6 Central Street in Manchester in 2013: <https://youtu.be/GOU381k0JBM>

All 6 parts of the home video footage shot by Paul Owens on 8 July, 1988 when Keith Chegwin visited Ocean Software to film his TV show 'Chegwin Checks It Out'. This is easily the best and longest record of what downstairs at Ocean looked and sounded like:

Part 1: https://youtu.be/s_l-wnX7ZPo

Part 2: <https://youtu.be/MQeT24UNLjE>

Part 3: <https://youtu.be/DZDTJAaMXJc>

Part 4: <https://youtu.be/5WTAJea5cxk>

Part 5: <https://youtu.be/o04y4JnZq8o>

Part 6: <https://youtu.be/N2YNSb2ecoY>

'The Story of Ocean Software: "The Biggest Games Company in the World"' documentary by Kim Justice: <https://youtu.be/o0TE927j4cs>

'Arcade Attack' interview: <https://www.arcadeattack.co.uk/interview-mark-r-jones/>

Blog on my visit to the 'Batman' set: <http://www.1989batman.com/2013/04/production-materials-pinewood-studios.html>

Page about me meeting Paul McCartney in 1990: <http://www.jiggler.de/images/pictures.htm>

Plus a news report about it I spent thirty years looking for. I'm in it, just! See if you can spot me: <https://youtu.be/jVUKeuK6FX0>

My self-penned 'Retro Gamer' Ocean feature: <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/retro-gamer/20190321/281659666367640>

'ZX Spectrum Games' interview: <http://zxspectrumgames.blogspot.com/2011/06/spectrum-games-programmer-interview.html>

'Retro Gamesmaster' interview: <http://www.retrogamesmaster.co.uk/mark-r-jones-2/>

'Haunted Generation' interview: <https://hauntedgeneration.co.uk/2020/10/22/felt-trips-not-nice-things-by-mark-r-jones/>

'80s Nostalgia' interview: <https://www.80snostalgia.com/interview-with-mark-jones/>

'Moby Games' page: <https://www.mobygames.com/developer/sheet/view/developerId,185093/>

Chapter 26: Bob Wakelin 1952 - 2018

The first Bob Wakelin art I ever saw was on the back page of issue 1 of *'Big K'* magazine around the end of March 1984. I didn't even own a computer at the time but was getting interested in them so bought the magazine as part of my research. The advert that caught my eye was from Ocean Software and showed a pirate ship surrounded by these very small but intricate illustrations for various games. I didn't know it at the time but six out of the seven titles shown were all from the same hand, Bob's. It was easily the best looking advert in the magazine.

As Ocean became more successful they started booking a whole page for each new game. They all featured the illustrations of Bob Wakelin and they looked so much better than most of the other software companies artwork. Well drawn, dynamic, along with super slick airbrushing. They were fun to look at! It was always exciting to see a new Ocean or, once the original incarnation had gone bust and Ocean acquired the name, Imagine game advertisement. *'Mikie'*, *'Hunchback II'*, *'Green Beret'*, *'Gift from the Gods'* and *'Kong Strikes Back'*, among others, all made me and my computer owning mates gasp in awe when we opened the pages of *'Crash'*, *'Sinclair User'*, *'Your Sinclair'* or *'C&VG'* and saw them for the first time. Games that were adorned with Bob's artwork looked great on the shelves of the software shops too. They stood out from the rest.

When, at the start of 1987, I found myself actually working at Ocean Software in Manchester my first proper task was to produce loading screens, using Bob's artwork, for the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC conversions of *'Mag Max'*. Once completed the Spectrum screen was easily the best piece of computer art I'd ever made. I had passed my initiation. It had helped immensely that the original artwork looked fantastic. It had made my job so much easier.

I was then given the ZX Spectrum conversion of *'Wizball'* as my first full project. When we started on it the artwork hadn't been finished yet. Half way through the project word came downstairs to the 'dungeons' at Ocean that the *'Wizball'* illustration had been delivered and, according to those who'd seen it, it was one of Bob's best. That very moment I stopped what I was doing and rushed upstairs to the art department as I was itching to start the loading screen for the Spectrum version of the game. That was my excuse for dropping everything and literally running up the two flights of stairs to the business offices of Ocean. I was given a photographic print of *'Wizball'*, took it downstairs and everyone crowded round my desk to have a look. It was amazing. Now we all knew what kind of identity the game would have once the adverts for it started to appear in the magazines and it sat on the shelves of the computer game shops up and down the country.

After that, whenever a new Bob Wakelin illustration turned up at Ocean it was big news. We all knew we had the best looking artwork in the country bar none. *'Athena'*, *'Renegade'*, *'Rastan'*, *'Combat School'*, *'Gryzor'*, *'The Vindicator'* and *'Operation Wolf'* – all caused ripples in the programming department at Ocean when their illustrations turned up for the first time. The one that caused the biggest reaction was when the art for *'Head Over Heels'* arrived. We had all seen the game progress as Jon Ritman and Bernie Drummond visited Ocean during its development, bringing with them each time a more completed version. We knew it was an amazing game. Then when we saw the artwork we were blown away. These tiny monochrome game graphics had been brought to life in full colour. "So that's what Head and Heels *really* look like!" we all thought.

I never saw Bob at Ocean's headquarters. As far as I know he didn't visit very often as his work made its way to Ocean via the postal service. I didn't even know what he looked like so if I had walked past him in the corridors I wouldn't have realised. Then, with the interest in retro games which had been gathering momentum for a few years, David East and Anna Bäckström of *'The Attic Bug'*, started working with Bob selling prints of his artwork, mugs, t-shirts and mouse mats to the retro crowd. All three people were at the first retro event I ever attended – *'Byte Back'* at Stoke-on-Trent on 7 March 2009. There I met Bob for the first time ever. I was dumb struck at first. I had known his name since I was 13 years old and here he was, standing right in front of me. I was given a huge *'Wizball'* poster for free by Bob which he kindly signed for me in silver pen at the bottom right hand corner. It has sat framed in my living room and above my computer desk ever since. I became friends with David and Anna and, through many more retro events, got to know Bob as well who would usually be there to sign the various prints that were sold of his old gaming artwork. Like me and my graphics, he was a bit perplexed at first at why his artwork resonated with so many people. He found it ever-so slightly weird. I think He soon got to understand it and

eventually, grew to love talking about his old artwork to various 40-somethings who all had his artwork on their bedroom walls, ripped out from magazines, when they were children.

Through various chats with Bob it became apparent that some of his artwork wasn't for sale. Bits of it had been lost or given away over the years. There was the occasion when Bob was told that Ocean Software was closing and all his art was going in to be dumped in a skip. Upon hearing this he rushed over to Manchester to rescue what pieces he could. His disgust at seeing some of his original art discarded on the floor along with dirty footprints on them was mentioned by him a few times in interviews. I set about trying to source some of these missing pieces from the highest quality versions that had been printed in various magazines so he would be able to start selling posters of them. Between us we managed to source and clean up *'Hunchback'*, *'Green Beret'*, *'Head Over Heels'*, *'Gift from the Gods'*, *'The Great Escape'*, *'Hunchback the Adventure'*, *'Daley Thompson's Supertest'* and many others for which the originals had been lost or unavailable. Bob was obviously pleased that he had regained good quality versions of some of his most remembered illustrations and I enjoyed reuniting him with them.

It was always a pleasure to see him at the various retro games shows where I would try and ask him not-so-obvious questions about his art that had been niggling me over the years. Bob got asked a lot of the same questions over and over again so I didn't want to annoy him by repeating the same ones. With his responses he always furnished me with interesting answers. During the last show I went to that Bob attended, *'Play Expo'* in Blackpool on 15 July 2017, we had a long chat outside in the sun. Bob was looking a bit worse for wear as he'd been ill on and off for a while and had recently collapsed while in hospital and had hit his head on the way down to the floor. He had a big bruise on his head and two huge plasters on his forehead. He was still in good spirits but had to carry hand sanitiser with him as his immune system was weak and shaking hands with lots of people, as happened during these events, could mean that Bob could fall really ill. I remember asking him why his illustrations hadn't appeared to have aged like lots of other artwork from the time. I explained that I can look at one now and it doesn't look thirty years old. To me it looked like it could have been made last week. He told me he didn't really know, other than he knew what he was doing. I could tell he was somewhat flattered by my comment. We stood outside chatting for about half an hour. It was here he also told me that plans were in place for him to start producing new art for various Spectrum Next games that were going to be released physically. I was so excited. I made sure I hadn't misheard him and said "So, you're actually going to be making some new game covers again?" "Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it actually. It's been so long since I've done anything like that", he replied.

I saw Bob one last time and it was easily the most memorable occasion. On Saturday 22 July 2017 David East was venturing over to his house in Liverpool to go through his poster folders and have a bit of a discussion as to which ones were still selling and were to be kept in the folders and which ones needed getting rid of. I was also invited. Once there and we were given a brew and Bob went through his art and each illustration would stir memories which he would then relay to us. It was a fascinating afternoon and took well over four hours. While we were there Bob expressed regret that he had lost his original artwork for *'Midnight Resistance'* and it was the one piece of art that people kept asking him for but he couldn't supply. I made a mental note to try and track down a decent quality version for him. We left Bob's house around five and word came back from his wife that Bob had been a bit down in the dumps the last week or so and our visit had cheered him up. Obviously, he had loved going through his old illustrations and taking that trip down memory lane. I will always be grateful to David for driving me from Manchester to Liverpool that day. I'll never forget it.

Via the power of Twitter, less than 24 hours later, I'd found someone who had an original A2 shop poster for *'Midnight Resistance'* and it was in near mint condition. This was easily the best known version of the artwork in existence. I told Bob the good news and sent him the photo of the poster that the owner had sent me.

Bob Wakelin: *"Welly well well. That looks extremely useful! Great work, Mark."*

While trying to source the best version it became apparent there were actually two different examples of the artwork for *'Midnight Resistance'*, each showing a completely different main character. I pointed this out to Bob and enquired if he knew why. At first Bob didn't even remember having to re-do the main character but there it was right in front of him.

Bob Wakelin: *“Excellent! Bloody hell. I think they’re both mine! I think I know but I’ll have to do a bit of detective work.”* he replied.

Initially Bob was puzzled:

Bob Wakelin: *“Every time I think I understand what happened it doesn’t quite make sense. Arg. However, I’m now seeing evidence of an overlay, probably on acetate. I’ll get there. I will. Seriously.”*

Meanwhile, within 24 hours, the A2 poster had been scanned in and was sitting on my computer in four separate parts as it had been too big to be scanned in one go. I set to work stitching the scans together and getting rid of any creases and scratches that were apparent once it had been magnified. I sent the finished scan to Bob.

Bob Wakelin: *“Awesome! Great job, Mark! I might tweak the colour slightly, but that’s spot on. I figured out the order of the changes to my original - I think. I’ll write ‘em down when I can be arsed.”*

Job done! Bob now had his *‘Midnight Resistance’* artwork in better quality than all four of us could have ever hoped for.

Still, the mystery of the two different versions was unanswered. Bob had been thinking about it and thus, a few hours later, came the reply.

Bob Wakelin: *“They wanted the man redone in a lighter style. They thought the original was a bit intense. Also, the lettering used on the final version was my original style - they initially got someone else to re-do it over the gnarly version. I would never have the head of the main character cut in half by the logo. Also, the nozzle flare was taken behind the logo. You can tell that the logo was altered by the incredibly weak gradation on it. I remember the logo alteration being done on an overlay, which was removed for the final version.”*

Mystery solved. Unfortunately Bob wasn’t around long enough to sell any newly printed posters from the *‘Midnight Resistance’* artwork.

Other than an enquiry from Bob as to if I knew who owned the original art for *‘M.O.V.I.E’* I was never to speak to him again. I woke up on the morning of Sunday 21 January 2018 to the awful news that Bob had passed away the previous day. What a terrible thing to happen. I was very sad so God knows how his family and friends felt. What followed on various social media platforms amazed me. The amount of tributes paid to Bob was astounding. Everyone who’d played a computer game in the 80s were expressing a huge feeling of loss. I was told after his passing that Bob thought highly of me, though he never said so to my face. That was nice to find out.

Bob has gone, but his huge body of work remains and shall always be there to show people what a talent he was. I remembered too that Bob had actually liked some of the silly drawings I’d done over the years and offered me advice on how I could improve.

Bob Wakelin: *“You should get a folio of those mad drawings together. Keep working and developing your technique. There’s a market out there in kid’s book publishing for that kind of stuff! I wouldn’t have bothered if they were crap. I get people sending me doodles on a regular basis and it’s bloody painful. This has a lot of potential - take your time developing consistency in the line work and who knows where it might go! Seriously.”*

So who knows? Maybe I should do as Bob says as a tribute. I didn’t know Bob well by any means but I had some great times with him, both as teenager marvelling at his artwork in magazines then while at Ocean, seeing his new creations long before the public did, and later on in person.

It wasn’t easy writing this the day after Bob succumbed to his illness. This was someone I have known about since I was 14 years old and was only just getting to know properly in person. It made me sad. We would never get to see any new creations from his hand.

Rest in peace Bob. It was nice to know you.